

NATALIE TAUTOU

1991 – 2023

“ SPOILED ROTTEN ”

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ISBN: 978-1-304-82724-1

*for my sisters
& children*

Everybody needs someone to know who they really are.

— JT LeRoy, *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*

I get sick of fiction.

— Dennis Cooper, *Period*

<i>fake.</i>	7.
<i>wish.</i>	21.
<i>numb.</i>	41.
<i>love.</i>	57.
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<i>close.</i>	77.
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FAKE.

FOR A MOMENT THEY LOCKED EYES, IF NOT FOR VERY LONG.

God you're so fucking beautiful.

Thank you daddy. Thank you thank you thank you.

Such a perfect little princess.

Fuck. Yes. I'm such a slut for you.

Shit. Your ass is so tight. Feels so good on my cock.

Please yes don't stop you're hitting my spot.

I'm so god damn lucky.

Harder yes please daddy it feels so fucking good.

That's what daddies are for right? Making their little girls feel good?

Yes God please don't stop please don't ever stop fucking me like this daddy.

Holy shit I'm gonna come.

James could've never have done this with his actual daughter, no matter whatever awful stuff his ex wife imagined he was capable of. She was only a child the last time he ever saw her face, so she'd stay forever young in his memory.

Sarah had just turned nineteen but she looked so much younger than that. Must have been the hormones. But she dressed like a parent's worst nightmare.

Where do you think you're going out like that?

I've got a date tonight. Remember? I told you this morning.

Right. Sorry, I forgot.

Yeah well my Uber's here. I'll text you the address.

Okay. Thank you. Promise you'll be good for me?

Cross my heart and hope to die.

He pecked her on the cheek, careful not to mess her makeup. She was wearing that schoolgirl outfit she pegged him in last Friday. The skirt was black and sparkly so whatever lube or come had stained it wouldn't show.

Text me on your way home.

Of course daddy.

Please be safe out there. You got your pepper spray right?

I'll be okay. Alright? I can take care of myself.

James couldn't help but worry. Just a few months ago she'd come home with her lip split and a black eye. Jesus Christ, he said, turning her face by the chin, who did this to you?

Just forget about it, Sarah said. She unzipped her boots and plucked a short stack of hundred dollar bills from the bottom. It's already been taken care of.

What are you talking about? For fuck's sake who hurt you?

She set her fingers on his lips and shushed him. They smelled faintly of blood. I told you. It's already been taken care of.

James helped her bring the bags into the basement. They each weighed a ton and when he asked what was in them she said it was better if he didn't know.

There was a spot in the floor where some work needed to be done. They set the bags in the exposed patch of dirt beneath the foundation. By now it was just about three in the morning. In his boxers and a wife beater James set out to finish the project he had promised his ex wife he'd get around to at least twice a year back when they were still a normal family.

Here. He handed her a bucket. Go upstairs and fill this up with water. He went into the corner and pulled a shovel from the spiderwebs.

James?

He looked up from his screen. Oh, hi Carol.

You alright? I came by and...

Yeah, sorry. I'll have those reports done by three.

Hey. Carol stepped into his cubicle. What's really going on? Is there something you'd like to talk about?

James never told his coworkers about the divorce. He preferred to keep his personal life private. Besides, that was years ago. Having such an important managerial position allowed him some professional distance. But lately he couldn't stop his coworkers from gossiping about the hickies on his neck.

I'm not gay, he insisted over drinks after work one night.

If you are that's fine. No one really gives a crap.

I'm a lesbian, David's bi...

But I'm not gay though.

You know Fiona in accounting's transgender?

Seriously? said the guy from logistics. No shit.

Remember she was out three months last fall? Came back looking different? David gestured at his face.

Amy nudged him. What's the matter James?

Maybe he's just shy.

Or homophobic

Look Jesus no. I don't have any problem with homosexuals.

So... like... do you have a girlfriend or no?

I... don't really have the time for that.

What about a boyfriend?

He checked his phone again and saw Sarah was on her way back. She was stopping for Chinese up the street and asked if he wanted anything.

Do you ever let them come inside of you?

Her drool soaked into the faded floral print sheets.

No I always make them wear a condom.

So they don't come inside you.

They do come inside me sometimes but only if they wear a condom.

So no one else is coming inside of you.

Only you, daddy.

Good girl. He fucked her even harder.

Fuck please I need it yes keep fucking railing me.

I'm going to come.

Fucking do it daddy.

I'm coming for you princess.

God please daddy I need it so bad.

I'm coming baby.

Please yes get me pregnant.

It wasn't something he hadn't considered before or even infrequently. He'd been spending bathroom breaks browsing threads on Reddit. Timelines they called them,

but the name was misleading. Most were just before and afters. There were women on there his age, but...

Are you alright?

He blew his nose. Yeah I'm fine. Just.

I heard you crying in there. Is everything okay?

Oh, um. It's. Kind of a personal thing...

For his actual flesh and blood daughter, puberty hit out of nowhere. He watched her sprout up like weeds seemingly overnight. It was all so strange watching the girl he once saw so sexless and androgynous blossom into maddening new shapes. His wife at the time caught him eyeing her in her church dress. When she brought it up he denied any sinful intentions. James wasn't a monster.

I've been having these. Um. Urges, he said to his therapist. Around my daughter.

Oh.

I mean. Nothing sexual.

Well, she said. If they are we should discuss them. It's actually quite natural to feel... unnatural desires... There's no shame in...

No, uh. I'm sorry... I don't think you understand. It's nothing quite like that.

Okay, then. How would you describe it?

It's um. Something more along the lines of... jealousy?

I see.

Like, I know it's fucked up but... I don't know.

Well, she said, jealousy is quite often misunderstood. It's actually an extremely useful emotion. I like to think of it as a guide, of sorts, for desire. Do you have any idea what you might be jealous of?

He drank another couple shots but still couldn't fall back asleep. He feared Sarah wouldn't be coming back this time. On TCM they were playing *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*. James didn't understand it even after all these years, but it was still very pretty to look at.

Eventually he heard the key turning in the lock and the door creaked open.

You're still up, she said.

Do you know what time it is?

Like, three AM, she yawned.

It's a school night. You really ought to be in bed. Where were you?

Just hanging out with friends.

He could smell the liquor on her breath. Have you been drinking?

Yeah, maybe. Her lipstick was smudged and her mascara was running. What're you gonna do about it?

He grabbed her by the ass and by the throat.

What do you think?

He got another call about a suspicious purchase. Yes... No... It was a gift for, uhm... He spoke in hushed tones. Someone might be eavesdropping. My girlfriend.

Kate Bush came on the classic rock station on the drive home from work. Making a deal with God seemed so absurd. Did he really want to swap their places? This seemed the simplest explanation for everything, but he couldn't imagine being a teen again. All those emotions.

Do you love me? James said.

Don't be ridiculous. Of course.

His daughter, his real one, would've turned twenty one today. He pictured her at the bar, drunk with friends, doing lines in the bathroom, puking over a balcony, being helped into a car by strange men. He wondered what she looked like now, but he was still blocked from all of her social media.

But would you still love me. I mean. If there wasn't money involved. Or a place to stay. I just. I know what this looks like. I'm not stupid.

Sarah smiled and took another bite of General Tso's chicken. She leaned her head against his shoulder. You're a nice guy, James. You're sweet, and you've never tried to hurt me. I mean. Not in a bad way.

Is that enough, though?

Daddy...

You really do find me attractive?

Please, just... don't overthink this.

The night she left him James' ex wife came home early having forgotten her purse. That's when she noticed the light from the bedroom and peeked through the crack in the door. She saw him in the mirror pirouetting and walked away without a sound, shocked and disgusted at such an unspeakable sight. She pinned a note to the fridge he didn't find until long after she was gone and that was that.

He followed her instructions dutifully. Took the clothes he'd so carelessly defiled, put them in a bin and burned them. He called the number on the paper and agreed to leave the house that Sunday to give them time and space to pack their things for good.

James had planned to kill himself not very long after the divorce. He drew a warm bath and set the razor blades along the edge and drank whiskey from the bottle

until it burned his throat smoking cigarettes with a bag tied around the smoke alarm watching Blade Runner on the motel's free HBO. But he never actually went through with it. He'd always been a coward, and besides, he had already given everyone enough trouble.

Here, he said.

What's this?

Open it.

The box was blue velvet, delicate and small. Sarah's bejeweled nails worked along the seam to pry it open.

Oh. James.

He had bought it for their anniversary just before their separation, but he didn't have the heart to return it.

I can't... This is...

Please. I want you to have it. I couldn't wear it if I tried.

She kissed him on the cheek. Thank you, she said. This means so much to me. He kissed her back and held her close and tight.

Anything for my princess.

James knew their time together was nearing its inevitable end. In just a few short months Sarah would be going away to college. Earlier that day he found the

acceptance letter in her desk in her bedroom underneath her diary.

Her hand reached for his cock, but he withdrew.

What's wrong?

He stared off into nothing for a while.

James?

Tonight, can we... He thought out all the words very carefully. I don't think I can do sex tonight, he said. I really just need someone to hold me.

At the mall he waited on the bench outside the dressing room for her to change, refreshing Facebook for notifications that never appeared.

How's this one? she twirled.

It's lovely. Just like you.

Not sure about the fit...

We can always get it tailored...

I think I like the other one better.

The black? Don't you think it's a little...

Daddy. They make these for teenagers.

James gave Sarah fifty bucks to buy them some coffee while he wrote out a check for the dress.

They grow up so fast, said the cashier. Don't you just wish you could keep them like that forever?

That night on the drive over, Sarah's left hand rested just above his knee as her right updated Twitter with links for new content on her OnlyFans. She could feel his heart was beating fast. She was a little bit nervous as well, but she did a couple bumps of ketamine before they left, so it all felt like a dream, or an arthouse porno; serene and detached. She surrendered herself completely to the act as they sang along to Steely Dan on the radio. Are you gathering up the tears? Donald Fagen sang. Have you had enough of mine?

He parked as close as they could to house. Kids were trick or treating just outside the gated community, dressed as ghouls and ghosts and all sorts of monsters and superheroes, but this wasn't that kind of party. They were adults. James cut off the engine. I love you, he said. No matter what happens next I will always love you.

Autumn winds blew leaves around their feet as they made their way up the driveway. Sarah's new heels clacked arrhythmically as she clung onto his arm for support. Cubic zirconia glimmered eloquently from between her breasts like starlight. Muffled voices could be heard through the walls. Glasses clinking, laughter. James rang the bell and a tall man in a cloak and a Venetian mask opened the door.

Well, his boss smiled. Look who finally decided to show.

James handed him a bottle of expensive champagne. Thought it might be nice for a change, he said. I would like to introduce you to my daughter.

WISH.

CAN WE NOT WITH THE MOMMY STUFF TONIGHT? JEREMY rolled off to the side. Of course, Cheryl said. You can always say no. Something on your mind? she asked. Where to start? Today had been a complete disaster. Not only did Jeremy forget to make cold brew the night before, he overslept his alarm and was two hours late for his shift, on a Saturday, of all days. He woke up to three missed calls from his boss, Rhea, who had thankfully swung by the coffee shop and noticed the line at the door.

When he finally got to work it was much too busy to get chewed the fuck out. Since no one was there when the bakers showed up they didn't have any pastries, which made the regulars pretty disappointed. To make matters worse, the parfaits and quiches had all gone off. Apparently when he was mopping up last night the cooler had gotten unplugged somehow. As Rhea explained all this in fits and spurts he knocked some glass over and cut his hand cleaning up the mess. It wasn't very deep but the blood still got everywhere.

By then their closers showed up early. Rhea must have called them in. Jeremy went to the backrooms and wrapped his hand with gauze and self adherent tape. By the time he came back out, Rhea was gone.

Is it bad? Eli asked, noticing the bandage.

Just a scratch.

If you just wanna tidy up, sweep, grab the dish bins, we can take it from there, Dennis said, pulling a double shot of espresso.

That gave him three hours to fuck around before therapy. He stopped by a Panera Bread and got stoned in the parking lot, then played a couple rounds of Splatoon on their Wi-Fi while he waited for the pager they gave him to vibrate. He blamed his losses on the shoddy internet connection.

Old Navy was having a big sale again. He made the rounds once more around the backroom, trying his best to look inconspicuous. Thankfully, the store was mostly empty. As the cashier rang him up he prayed he got the sizes right this time. Clearance items, she reminded him, were nonreturnable.

His therapist asked if he had been smoking weed. No, he said, not today, at least. Last week he mentioned

wanting to cut back, or take a tolerance break, or limiting it to only afternoons and weekends.

I only ask because you smell like you've been smoking, she said. I didn't mean to pry.

No worries. I was hanging out with my coworkers earlier. They're all big stoners. But I just stick to coffee.

I see, she said, writing something in her notebook.

His therapist reminded him marijuana was a mild dissociative, and since dissociation had been brought up as an issue multiple times over their last few sessions, it would be in his best interest to continue to abstain.

After their session he went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot red. Jeremy couldn't tell if it was from smoking pot or crying. Why was he acting so god damn emotional? Things could've been so much worse. He could be homeless, for one. Near the end of his first year in college he learned students couldn't just stay in their dorm rooms for the summer. He had no money saved up to fly back home and no friends to live with. Jeremy was fairly antisocial. Most students his year, he presumed, lacked the intellect or depth to form meaningful friendships or connections. He much preferred spending time with his professors.

Cheryl Rose taught English and Gender Studies, mostly. Jeremy wasn't a bad student, per se, just... a bit absentminded. Scatterbrained. Sweet, but awkward. He reminded her a lot of herself at that age. The long hair, baggy band tees, skinny jeans and Chucks... He was rough around the edges. He could use a little work.

She owned a little house not too far off campus. With clandestine intentions Cheryl proposed subletting him the guest bedroom for cheap.

It's summertime, she said. I could use the company.

Jeremy didn't expect they would've fucked, let alone started dating. At first it was kind of a joke. When they matched on Tinder he hadn't even recognized her. She wore different makeup in the pictures, and the name was all emojis. Cheryl thought he was doing a bit and played along with him at scheduling a date until he was asking for her number.

Why don't you ask your roommate, she replied.

The first time they hooked up was strange. Jeremy didn't know she had a cock. After making out a while he tried to slip his fingers in her pussy but instead jammed them up her butt. Ow, she said. Let me go get some lube. When she came back she had slipped off her panties, her cock bouncing daintily, lifting at her dress.

Oh, he blushed.

Oh?

Yea I just... I didn't know you were... you know...

You didn't know I was trans?

Jeremy nodded.

Wait. How?

He shrugged.

I said so the first day of class.

I, uh... wasn't paying attention.

The pride flag? I mean, it says right there on my profile.

No one reads profiles, he said. I don't mind, you know. Like, I'm not gonna lie. I'm kinda really into it. He was already down on his knees, eager to show her how much it wouldn't really make any difference.

The mommy thing came sort of naturally after that. Jeremy talked a lot about his family. Mostly about how much they sucked. It showed in his lack of discipline. He struggled to keep up with the chore wheel. Like it was easier to apologize for not doing something than trying and doing it wrong. Cheryl really had to bring the hammer down. You've got to make an effort, okay babe? Promise you'll be good? Sweet talk seemed to work, more or less. Cheryl would still have to spank him every

now and then, to make a point. But she always spanked him harder for doing good.

Sometimes he cried, like he was doing right now.

Baby, what's the matter?

In his mind Jeremy had been replaying everything that had led him to this very moment. Suddenly he stopped. I'm okay, he said. Nothing's wrong.

Cheryl could always tell when he was faking it. She didn't like the way he forced himself to smile. Why the facade? So much crying lately but she still hadn't broken him yet. Maybe it was time to up his dosage again.

I can't sleep, she said. How about some wine?

He mulled it over for a second, then said Wanna watch some anime?

Cheryl poured the chardonnay over the estradiol at the bottom of his glass. She could hear the Cowboy Bebop theme song from the living room. The clock on the wall read just about midnight. Close enough.

Happy birthday to you, she sang, setting the serving tray on the coffee table. Happy birthday to you.

Twenty two candles burned atop a chocolate cake. Jeremy felt embarrassed. What had he done to deserve this? Make a wish, she smiled. He blew the candles out.

Want to know what I wished for? he said.

Please don't tell. Then it won't come true. Cheers. They clinked their glasses together.

He went to work the next day with a hangover. Only a couple minutes late this time. Sup dudes, he said, then Shit sorry my bad, remembering their pronouns.

Hey, Eli said.

Sup, Dennis said.

It's my birthday, Jeremy said. He had a good feeling about today. Probably because he had time to smoke a joint on the drive to work.

Wow, congrats, Eli said.

Boss wants to talk with you, Dennis said. She's in the back right now.

Rhea closed her laptop. Have a seat. Jeremy obeyed. I'm sure you know why we're having this conversation.

Is this about yesterday? God I'm so embarrassed. Don't worry though. It won't happen again.

You said that the last couple of times.

But this time I mean it, I swear. Just give me another chance.

Rhea sniffed. Are you high right now?

What? No, no, why would I come to work stoned?

Look, Rhea said, we have a policy here. Three strikes and you're out. You've already broken it several times.

What is this really about? Are you firing me?

What do you think?

Jeremy drove around for about an hour after that listening to rap music. He'd been saving this second joint for the drive home but figured there was no time like the present. Fuck, what now? He guessed he could go back to donating plasma but that was such a drag, and a time sink if you didn't get there right when they opened.

Then his brother called. Happy b-day dude! He started singing Taylor Swift. I dunno about you...

Eddie was cool as shit. He was a DJ and a fixture of the local rave scene.

Hey what's up? Guess who just got fired?

Oh no shit bro, fuck! Damn dude, that sucks. What are you doing right now?

Uhm just driving around, trying to clear my head, why what's up?

I'm in town for a gig, you wanna hang out?

They met at the downtown Chipotle. I'm fucking starved, Eddie said. Oh yeah, I brought you this, handing Jeremy a brownie wrapped in plastic. You should eat that now so it don't take forever to kick in. They scarfed up their burritos and washed them down with Mexican Cokes. Bro, I could go for a beer, Eddie said.

Me too.

They walked to the barcade just up the block.

Shit what happened to your hand?

Oh that? Cut it open on broken glass.

Fuck. That's hardcore.

Jeremy had never been here. It seemed a bit too trendy from the outside. All the purple tinting and neon lights. Inside the crowd was mostly androgynous types with dyed undercuts and tattoos. But the music was really cool, all new wave. Eddie ordered them a pitcher of beer. Hey man you know what time is it?

Jeremy checked his phone. Four eighteen?

Fuck let's get outside. I got a rollie on me.

A simple but enchanting melody chimed over the speakers. Orchestral Manouvres in the Dark? Jeremy recognized this one. It's beautiful. Tears welled up until he noticed Eddie trying to pass him the blunt.

Damn dude whatcha thinking about?

Oh, it's nothing, just. You know.

How's that girl you're seeing? Cherry?

Cheryl. Yea It's pretty good, you know.

I'm glad. I couldn't date a girl like that. Not like there's anything wrong with it, obviously. Eddie took another toke. You gotta be careful, he said.

What do you mean?

It's, like, those transsexuals. The women especially. They're so pushy. Everything with them is about being trans. Probably because they're so lonely, you know. Not many people like them. But they get so absurd with it. The other day I got in an argument with this one chick about Kurt Cobain. Said he was actually a trans woman or some crap like it's obvious? Crazy shit. I don't see it.

Eddie bought them another pitcher of beer. Jeremy thought, maybe he was right. He'd been having these weird thoughts ever since moving in with her. It became something like an obsession. About once a week he'd play at this little ritual. There was a floor to ceiling mirror in the guest bedroom, and he'd try on all the new clearance stuff he'd bought around town, but nothing ever seemed to fit right. It was either too big or too small. None of it actually sold him on being a woman.

Maybe it really was just a kink or something like that. Jeremy pondered the night before with her dick in his ass. When did he start fucking trans women? High school? He knew he wasn't gay or whatever. It was only chicks with dicks. They were easy, for one, and they liked to put him down. He saw it as feminist, some kind of emasculation. As Cheryl whispered in his ear the night

before, this was exactly where he belonged. Beneath her. It wasn't just penetration. She had stuck him in his place like a pin through a butterfly. You're such a good boy, she said, over and over again as she thrust harder, deeper inside of him. He was starting to believe it.

Hey, Eddie snapped his fingers in front of his face. Yo check this out. Two lesbians were making out by the bar. Björk sang over the speakers something about how you can't say no to hope or happiness. Like, get a room, right? he said. Yooo you wanna play House of the Dead?

They shot zombies in the face for a couple minutes, pumping quarter after quarter into the machine. Fuck! God! Eddie was getting really frustrated. No dude you gotta shoot the projectiles, he said. Watch out on your left SHIT bro what the fuck are you doing?

I'm not used to playing with my left hand.

It's fine. Forget it. Let's just play something else.

Jeremy downs the rest of their pitcher then points out the Dance Dance Revolution machine in the corner.

Aw, hell no, Eddie said. They used to play DDR all the time at the mall. It was the one game Jeremy could always beat Eddie at. His hand eye coordination might have been terrible, but there was something different about his feet.

C'mon, bro, it'll be just like old times.

Alright, fine. It's your birthday.

The edible kicked in hard. Eddie hit random and saddled them with some fast paced happy hardcore song. Cartoonish voices chanted What we do is what you just can't do as arrows flew upward at a staggering rate. Not a few seconds in and Eddie had to stop and catch his breath. But Jeremy was in a trance. He gripped the rail behind him and flung his feet with incredible precision as the combo number climbed into the hundreds.

As his heart raced, the cut in his hand reopened, soaking through onto the bar. Between the adrenaline, the booze, and the edible, Jeremy didn't notice. But then his wrist slipped from the pressure, and he twisted backwards onto his face.

It ain't so bad, Eddie said, it looks a lot worse than it actually is. That didn't stop it from hurting. Jeremy started sobbing. Hey easy man, don't cry. No need to make a scene. Think you're good to drive? Jeremy wiped his eyes, pressed the paper towels into the cut on his forehead and nodded yes.

They walked back down the street to the Chipotle.

Hey Jeremy? Where'd you park the car?

I swear it was... Jeremy's heart sank. It wasn't where he left it. I think I parked in front of a fire hydrant.

Eddie started to laugh. Dude. How the fuck did you...? Jeremy wept. C'mon, don't cry, shit, look. We can just go pick it up.

I don't have any money, Jeremy said.

Dude, I'll spot you.

That wasn't my car. I'm not on the registration.

Oh, Eddie said. Ohhhh.

Just. Think you can give me a ride home?

Sure bro. Hey. Eddie put his arm around him. It's gonna be alright. Okay?

Cheryl was eating leftover pasta in her bathrobe watching some old black and white screwball comedy. You're home early, she said, I thought you were closing? Jeremy staggered to the couch and pulled his Chucks off. Are you drunk? He chuckled softly. Oh my god are you bleeding?

He couldn't hold the tears back any longer.

Sweetheart what happened?

It was hard to make out with him in hysterics but Cheryl thought she got the gist of it. Oh, honey. She took him in her arms and held him close. Let's get you in the shower. How's about a nice cup of coffee?

As she waited for the water to boil she could hear him weeping through the walls. Good, she thought. It must be working. Let it all out, girl. She measured out his dose, then looked out the window and noticed something missing.

He dried off and put on pajamas. His forehead had stopped bleeding, for the most part. Eddie was right, it was worse than it looked. He put a Band-Aid over it and rewrapped his hand with some fresh gauze and tape.

Thanks, he muttered, taking the mug she gave him and sipping daintily.

Hey, can I ask you something? Where is my car?

Jeremy set his head in his hand. I uh. It got towed.

Towed?

Yeahhh. I maybe kinda parked it illegally?

Oh, honey.

I'm so sorry, he said, I know how expensive it is, I wish I wasn't broke, honestly... otherwise I'd help pay for you to get it out or whatever... again, I'm so sorry...

Cheryl sighed. She looked annoyed. It's fine, I... You know they charge by the hour? The longer it sits in the lot the more it costs. Shit.

I swear I didn't mean for this to happen.

Oh, Jeremy. I know you didn't.

Cheryl took out her phone, called the closest tow yard and gave them the license plate number. Yes that's correct. The gray Malibu. Mmmhmm. Thank you. She hung up. I'm getting an Lyft, she said.

Guess I really did fuck things up.

Yes, you sure did. Why don't you just sit a while, think about what you've done? There's lasagna in the fridge if you're hungry. Promise me you won't not eat just to punish yourself. Can you do that for me?

Yes, I promise.

Yes, I promise what?

Yes, I promise mommy.

Good boy. Now stay. Mother's got to get dressed.

He watched a couple episodes of Death Note, then thought to maybe cheer himself up by trying on yesterday's Old Navy haul. But it was the same deal as always. The sleeves on this dress were much too tight. One burst at the seams as he tried to pull it up his arm. This next one squeezed too tight around his chest. He couldn't get it over his head. Jeremy shoved it back in the bag and, in a fit, flung it at the window, rattling the blinds. He felt so fucking stupid. Why couldn't he just ask Cheryl for help with this? They were roughly the same size. He could probably just wear her clothes.

Huh. Why hadn't he thought about that before?

Sometimes, when she was away, Jeremy would sneak into her room, open up her hamper, find a pair of soft cotton panties and sniff them as he touched himself. He was surprised to find they smelled exactly like pussy. Guess that makes sense. If hormones changed your body chemistry, why wouldn't it change the way you smelled?

But sex was the furthest thing from his mind tonight. This was scientific, an experiment. Perhaps even a moment of truth. He stepped through the legs of some lacy floral prints and pulled them up. They fit perfectly.

Jeremy turned around in the mirror. The way they cupped his ass, it almost looked feminine. So this was the right size. He checked the waistband but the tag was worn. He couldn't read it. Same with all the other panties he dug out. Hmm. What about the closet?

He found the first dress he ever saw her in, the one she wore that first day of class. It cut a figure so fine he couldn't shake her silhouette. He was haunted by it. Where were those stockings? he wondered, checking the drawers. Ah, here's some. He sat on the bed and pulled them up over his hips, then dragged the dress over his head, struggling to zip it up in the back, until, finally. There we go. He got up and looked in the mirror.

Oh. Okay.

Spinning, it flared, landing gently against his thighs. Hmm. Okay. He could see it. Except maybe the face... He took off his glasses. All he could see in his reflection now was the form, long hair draped over its shoulders. There we go. Yeah. It suddenly all seemed plausible.

A door slammed downstairs. Crap, he thought. Uhhh. He tried to pull the dress over his head, but couldn't, then remembered the zipper in the back. He twisted frantically, but struggled to catch it with his fingers. Jeremy? Cheryl called from downstairs. Shoot.

She noticed the light on and opened the door. A pair of panties dangled from the mouth of her hamper. Jeremy? She looked under the bed, peeled back the curtains, then finally opened the closet.

Hey. What are you doing in there?

I, uh...

She started to laugh when she realized what he was wearing. Jeremy was blushing. I should've asked, he said, I'm so sorry...

Pumpkin. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's natural for boys to get curious and try on their mother's clothes. Happens all of the time.

Jeremy figured this was probably true.

You think mommy's pretty, don't you?

Of course I...

You wanted to be just like her? Pretty like a girl?

Jeremy nodded sheepishly.

Oh, my darling. But you are pretty. You just need someone to show you how pretty you are. Have a seat.

He sat at the vanity straddling the bench. Cheryl took her place facing him. Hold still, Cheryl said, this won't take very long. Just gonna give you a little makeup.

It tickles, he said as she packed foundation on his face and dusted blush on his cheeks. Minutes passed.

Okay now look up, like that. Good girl. There we go. Almost done. Just gonna... put a bit of lipstick... can you kiss yourself? Perfect. You can relax now. Look.

A stranger was staring back where his reflection used to be. She wasn't as ugly as he had thought she'd be.

Do you see her now? In the mirror? Cheryl smiled, and her girl smiled back tentatively. This felt right.

Wait here a second, she said. There's something I've been saving for just this occasion.

Cheryl left and came back with a folded up paper bag. These clothes used to belong to my ex, she said. She was just about my size. Yours too, I suppose. Would you like to try them on?

She thought it over for a bit. Could you help me out of this? I think I'm stuck.

Of course. She unzipped the back and pulled it over her head. Here. I think this would look cute on you.

It was a cami dress with straps and buttons on the front. They weren't functional but they did look precious. The skirt was patterned with sunflowers, the print fractured and mismatched at the seams. Let me help, Cheryl said. Oh, my. That is just. You should go look in the mirror.

Cheryl was right. It did look cute on her.

You're not upset with me?

Upset? No, I was never upset. Maybe disappointed.

I don't know what to do about money, she said. I'm already behind on rent. And now...

Shhh. Don't you worry that pretty little head of yours. I'll take care of you. Cheryl kissed her softly on the cheek. She wanted to cry but there wasn't any tears left to shed. You ought to think of a name, Cheryl said.

The girl was quiet for a while. How did you choose?

Cheryl shrugged. Same as most girls. Just tried out a bunch of different stuff until something stuck.

She thought back as far as she could remember.

My mom used to tell me they were gonna name me Laura. But I wasn't born a girl. The doctor said I was gonna be a girl, but I wasn't. It's funny, though, now that I think about it, I guess he was right all along.

Laura. Oh, that is such a lovely name. It's perfect. My love. Cheryl ran her fingers through Laura's hair.

I feel so fucking stupid, she said.

Aw, Laura, but you are. Such a dumb little girl. Cheryl brushed her daughter's hair from her eyes. That's okay. You're still so very new to this. Practically a child. Hmm. She went to the vanity and came back with scissors. You know, you're long overdue for a trim. How do you feel about bangs?

I dunno, what do you think?

You still trust me?

Laura realized what was happening. There was no turning back from here. She started to hyperventilate.

Deep breaths, sweetheart. Do we need to stop?

Laura shook her head No.

I'm scared, she said. What do I do now? I have to find a doctor, I have to, uh, hormones, I need... I need...

Cheryl took her softly in her arms as she shivered and trembled. My sweet little angel, she said. Don't you worry about a thing. Mommy's got you.

NUMB.

THEIR GRINDR PROFILE CIRCUMVENTED THE ENTIRE ISSUE. Probably out of necessity. The bar where they met her was loud. Men in jumpsuits played sloppy DEVO covers in the corner. Use your freedom of choice, they sang.

Let me guess, Violet said. You're pornographers.

They weren't unattractive for a cishet couple. A bit boring, maybe, but they had money. This was important. Violet needed money. The guy reminded her of countless Post Malone wannabes she sucked off in high school. Face tats, dyed hair in cornrows. The girl was a rail thin Lana Del Rey hipster type. Could've been worse.

Well that is one way to put it, said the guy. But no, not quite. We make conceptual video art. For adults.

Pornographic, maybe, said the girl. But I wouldn't call it pornography. Think of it like smut, or praxis.

We aim to uplift sexual minorities.

Right, Violet said, and I'm trans. She sipped her Shirley Temple, staring at the Xes on her hands.

Well yes, said the guy, but you're also a teenager. Kids need someone they can relate to.

We've worked with lots of teens, said the girl. Legal, of course. Intergenerational relationships are important, but so is consent.

My name is Jessie, by the way, said the guy. He him. This is Kimber.

Jessie nudged her. Oh, right. Mine are she her.

Well, I'm Tracy, Violet said. I'm a girl. But that's beside the point. Let's talk business.

They discussed the perplexing broad strokes then decided to iron out the finer details under more private circumstances. Violet conveyed a sense of desperation she hoped would earn their sympathy, punctuated by her growling stomach.

Are you hungry? Kimber said.

I could go for some chicken nuggets, Jessie said.

They stopped by a McDonald's off the interstate. But the line to the drive through was backed out into traffic. It's faster to order inside anyways, Jessie said. He asked what everyone wanted and went in to order.

So what's your deal, kid? Kimber was idly scrolled Instagram liking photographs of food. Turning tricks out of bars? Seems risky.

I mean. It is. Mostly just needed a place to stay.

You don't say. What's the story?

I'd rather not get into it.

Oh I know how that stuff goes. One time my sister's roommates kicked her out over some bullshit. Said they didn't understand the point of they them pronouns. Something about erasing women.

I see.

Kimber hit her vape and offered it to Violet.

No thank you, she said. I don't smoke.

Suit yourself. She turned up the air conditioning. Violet noticed the band on her left ring finger.

So, uh, you two married or something?

Mmhmm. Three years now come Valentine's.

A muffled bang came from within the McDonald's. Violet turned and saw Jessie rushing out the door carrying bags and sodas in a cardboard drink holder. He opens the door and slips in, slams it shut. Go! he growls as they peel out the lot into traffic, almost getting sideswiped. Pistol in one hand, he sets it inside the door, then hands her a Coke and her bag. Quarter Pounder with fries and two apple pies. He nearly fumbles it laughing his ass off then straps on his seat belt. You shoulda seen the look on their face, he said. Scared the crap outta them. Brrahp, brrahp, he gesticulates with finger guns, just like that.

Wow, Kimber laughed, you're such a bad boy.

Violet didn't pay them any mind. She was hungry. At a light she turned to look out her window and saw a girl in her car on her phone with blue hair. With her big nose and five o'clock shadow Violet assumed she was probably trans. Whoever it was possessed staggering beauty. Violet imagined the stranger looming over, soft arms pressing her down into the mattress, soft lips teasing at hers, and swooned. She held on to this feeling, turning it over in her mind like a tool she knew she would have to use later. Kimber made a joke and Jessie chuckled spewing flecks of mush and wiping them off the console with paper towels. When Violet looked back out the window, the girl was gone.

She half expected some big scene when they came through the toll with cops and bullshit but their SunPass ensured they didn't have to interact with anyone. Just a couple miles down the road was their beach house. Baby pink and precious. They parked in the wide garage beneath its stilts. Violet couldn't help but wonder how stable it was, what force it would take to send it tumbling down on them and all their fancy sports cars. Even the yard tools were designer.

It was midnight on the beach. Clear skies of the darkest purple. Stars and moonlight made the sand glow like amber. It all seemed so alien, the drone reminding Violet more of deep space recordings than ocean. The interior was appropriately gleaming and immaculate. She thought about those weird little UFO shaped houses they built in the seventies, like how people on TV in abduction stories describe the insides of spacecraft. Clinical and abstract. Mirrors everywhere. Mysteriously lit... was the light coming from the floor? Or the wainscot paneling?

Kimber smooched her husband on the cheek. Mind giving the pet some food? He vanished somewhere Violet couldn't see.

What a day, Kimber stretched and yawned. I'm beat. How's about a drink?

Oh, no thank you, Violet said, I'm sober. Actually, though? Could I bother you for a glass of water?

Yes absolutely. One second.

Violet looked at the photographs lining the walls of their living room. In each picture the couple were locked in some romantic, often erotic pose, usually with a third. She got closer to the frames. Whoever these unknown women with them were were all extremely clocky.

We'll introduce you to your playmate shortly, Kimber said. Then, off to bed. We've got an early day ahead of us.

I assumed I'd be working with Jessie? She took a sip from the cup Kimber handed her. It tasted like nothing.

Him? Oh, no. Talent these days skews heavily male. Wouldn't be subversive. Come. Let me give you the tour.

Down the hallway they stopped at a door. Oh right, Kimber said. Where are my manners. Hold on one second. She disappeared into the room and came back with a neon pink Nike duffel bag. Kimber unzipped it. Violet peered inside. She had never seen so much cash in one place. It was like something out of a movie. You'll get the other half once we're done, of course.

And when will that be?

Whenever you're happy, Kimber said.

Happy with what?

The results. Kimber hit her vape. You'll see.

A few turns later they came to a heavy black door. Inside was what appeared to be a soundstage. One half was painted gray, scattered with lighting rigs, shotgun mics, cameras and tripods. The other half was decorated like a classroom with a chalkboard and rows of desks. Violet picked an apple up off the big one in front.

Nice attention to detail.

Don't get too cozy, Kimber said. We're redecorating tomorrow. Say, mind if I ask you a personal question?

Well... we're here now... sure. Why not?

What kind of movies do you like?

Violet chuckled. She had expected something sexual. Oh. Uhm. Like, horror, mostly. Goopy shit, you know. Seventies and eighties, slasher movies, older stuff too... Anything black and white... Why do you ask?

Kimber hit her vape.

The door behind them creaked open. A tall figure in latex walked through on a long leash. It's form was feminine and faceless. Some kind of gas mask was strapped over a tight eyeless rubber hood. Very anime. It reminded Violet of Metal Gear Solid. Jessie followed, now shirtless, wearing pink camo pants and Crocs.

This is... Well... it doesn't have a name yet... You see, it's not quite finished. Kimber beckoned Violet closer. Don't be shy, Tracy... I promise it won't bite.

Afterward they showed Violet where she would be sleeping. The room stood in stark contrast to the rest of the house. There was carpet, for one, and color. Curtains patterned with seashells crabs and starfish swayed in the ocean breeze.

Violet locked the door and noticed a TV on a dresser plastered with Lisa Frank stickers next to a fairly large cube in the corner with a big black sheet of fabric draped over it. Curious, she lifted up the cloth. Tufted crushed red velvet lined the bottom, chains attached to each corner ending in padded cuffs.

Hmm.

Something felt off. This couple was probably serial killers. Maybe even worse. Violet didn't want to find out. Time for plan B. She turned the TV on and watched American Dad reruns with the volume low for about an hour, all the while practicing her knife, warming up.

Even with the lights off the halls still seemed to glow. They must be heavy sleepers, she thought. There were two sets of snores reverberating through the walls. Around this corner was a floating staircase. Their noise was getting louder. This must be the place. Violet readied her switchblade. She knew she would have to be quick, one right after the other. Slow and methodical. One shot. The hinges swung quietly. Soft, she stepped towards the drone. It was darker than she expected. Weird. They sounded wet, maybe even sick. Wheezing and guttural. Not at all what she imagined. Moments passed. After a while her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Where you might expect a headboard looked more like the wall of a mineral deposit. Glistening thin oily trails of slime dripped onto the hardwood. Whatever it was was convulsing slowly in the dark. It seemed to turn and face her. Then, one after the other, it opened up its sockets and lurched, slightly.

The rest from there was all a blur. She found her shoes, then the door. Unlocked and down the stairs into the howling night. The sky flickering and cracked. Cold flecks spattered her arms and neck. It started to rain.

Headlights swerved to avoid her, honked, then sped off. The next car nearly ran her over. She leapt out the way. But the third one she flagged screeched to a stop. Violet chased after. The window rolled down. Hop in.

She recognized that nose and blue hair immediately. What were the odds?

God you're soaked, said the stranger.

Th... thank you... Violet said through chattering teeth. She shivered. Thoughts racing like a bad dream.

Heading into town?

Yeah, sure... I just... Where now? The rain was really coming down now. She could dry off at a Whataburger, wait for some desperate drunk she could seduce and rob. There was still twenty dollars tucked into her bra.

The stranger drove on down the road. You cold? She motioned to the thermos in the cup holder. Got some coffee. It's black.

The thermos was warm. For a while Violet held it in her hands and breathed deeply.

What's your name?

Tracy, Violet said and took a sip, then another. It burned her tongue. Quite bitter. What's yours?

Oh, it's um. Doesn't really matter now.

What do you mean?

Violet's arms got weak, her vision blurred. Oh, no.

She woke up in that same room with the TV still on. The cage with the cloth over it was gone. Someone was knocking at the door.

Wake up babe, Jessie said, breakfast is ready.

They ordered a bunch of Waffle House from DoorDash. We didn't know what you like, Kimber said, so we got a little bit of everything.

Uhm. Okay. She felt a little fuzzy.

We'll get started once we eat, Kimber said. Jessie pecked her cheek and squeezed her ass affectionately.

Violet scrubbed herself raw in the shower with scalding hot water. She didn't feel dirty but she didn't like how she had woken feeling up so clean. Smelling like

lavender, or rose. Something floral. Like someone had bathed her while she was asleep. I need to get the fuck out of here, she thought, brushed her teeth, rinsed, and spit.

Kimber led her once more to the soundstage. Now it looked like a nurse's office. A chair with stirrups sat by a tray with medical tools. Cameras were pointing at it.

Tracy, Kimber said. She was dressed in scrubs with her hair tied back in a ponytail and black latex gloves. I would like to ask for your consent.

For what?

Whatever happens next. You really want to know?

I mean...

You can always revoke consent whenever you'd like. Jessie can drive you back into town. You'll still keep half the money. We're not evil people. We only want to help.

Okay, so what am I consenting to exactly? You have to tell me, right?

It's... an experience. Kimber shrugged. Conceptual visual art. Withholding information is part of the piece. If we told you what you were consenting to it wouldn't be consent. At least, not within the context of the piece.

She thought once more about the money. You really mean it? Like, I can tap out whenever?

Just say the word and we'll stop. Do you have a safeword? We ought to establish ourselves a safeword. How does red sound?

Red works.

Is that a yes, then?

Yes. Yes, it is.

Good girl. Kimber hit her vape. Why don't you take your clothes off and have a seat over there. Jessie, get into position. Violet stripped nude and sat on the edge of the examination table. Kimber lifted her legs and affixed them to the stirrups. Let's have a look, she said.

Violet could see the tray in her peripheral vision. She wondered which of these implements was sharpest.

Kimber turned her genitals over in her hand. Wow, she said. Impressive. Your cock is abnormally large. I'd like to run some tests, if you don't mind. She winked. Violet remembered they were filming.

Sure, she said, I'd really like to get to the bottom of this. What did you have in mind?

I think we can start with an oral examination. Kimber wrapped her mouth around her cock. What a relief, Violet thought. This was just a regular porno. They were only being weird about it. She closed her eyes and moaned. Acting aside, it felt good. But the scalpel

never left her mind. Forget it, she thought. Relax. You're getting paid for this.

There we go. Wow. Kimber kissed the tip. It's so big. Aw but you're awfully pent up. This is dangerous. We ought to get you some release. If not... Well... She cupped Violet's balls in her hand.

Wait stop, Violet said.

Is something the matter?

It's just... Uh... I don't like my balls touched.

But your penis is fine?

Oh, yes. Just. Not there. If that's okay.

Sure. Good to know that. Shall we continue?

Yeah. Okay.

She rubbed Violet's cock on her face affectionately. Alright. Let's get you nice and sedated.

Violet felt a little prick shoved deep into the thickest part of her thigh. Something cold blossomed. Uhhh. Fuck. Her heart sped up then slowed to a crawl. Her arms went limp to her side and she started to drool. Whatever it was made her feel pleasantly fuzzy.

You might feel a little bit funny, Kimber said. Jessie rapped on the door in the back and that tall figure in latex from last night came through. Violet's thoughts wandered. Who was that? The girl from the car? Same

height, she thought, maybe? Hard to tell. What was her name? Violet never caught her name. So very pretty. Gorgeous. If the stranger was working with them there was at least some chance maybe they would meet again. She hoped.

Kimber walked behind the figure and unhooked the gas mask. As I said before, she said, it's incomplete.

Violet started to laugh. It looks so silly. Tongue dangling from the hole where its jaw should be. Teeth hanging like stalactites from the pink upper palette. It pulls the hood off and looks even sillier. Big shock of blue hair dangled over empty eye sockets. A cavity for a face. Like someone had taken a big ice cream scoop to it. Kimber guided the shape beside her and made it take Violet by the hand.

You're not gonna do that to me are you? she slurred.

Oh heavens no. We wouldn't remove anything you wouldn't want us to remove. Here. She pulled the hood over her head. There we go. Finally, darkness. Nothing to see here. Perfect.

Violet heard tiny little zaps, like a short in a wire. They sounded distant, like everything else. Something was poking at her face.

What's that? Violet slurred.

Just inserting a tiny wire into your hair follicles, sending through an electric current, destroying them.

Terrified of these words and then... Violet forgot what she was so worried about. Whatever this was felt nice. Like falling asleep on a sunbeam. What was that stuff? Violet could feel her body starting to levitate. Can I have some more? she mumbled.

Maybe later, Kimber said. It's pretty strong stuff.

Tee hee, Violet laughed. That tickles.

Please. Be still.

She felt something cold underneath her as Kimber made the first incision, like a line being traced beneath her as she slit open her scrotum. Jessie was holding a little camera in his other hand. Damn, he said, zooming in. That's gonna look gnarly on VHS.

LOVE.

AS THEIR BUS PULLED OUT A CROWD CHEERED ON IN VAIN hope they might will something awesome into existence. Perhaps a triumphant noise might erupt from within, speakers rising from the roof alongside the band as they explode into riotous impromptu performance, like something out of an early aughts nü-metal music video. But of course none of that happened. They simply drove off into the night.

Bummer, huh? said a voice much deeper than hers.

Third bomb threat this week.

Fuck. Are you serious? I hate that shit. Assholes.

The older girl was wearing a threadbare Sonic Youth shirt beneath a worn-out black leather jacket smoking black American Spirit cigarettes. She offered her one.

Thank you, Jane said and lit it. She had seen her before, somewhere. Maybe at a show? It was hard to tell.

What's your name?

Aurora, said the older girl. You?

Jane. She offered to buy her a drink, but Aurora declined politely. I'm sober, she said. Five years today.

Congratulations. Wow. That doesn't sound easy.

It wasn't. Thank you.

What about weed? Do you smoke?

And just like that, they were friends. Aurora lived less than a block away from Jane, turns out, so she offered her a ride home. By the time they actually got back to the car two joints later they both had a bad case of the munchies. As luck would have it a diner on the way was open and relatively empty. Jane offered to pay. She got her first paycheck this morning and it was a lot more than she had expected.

You don't gotta, really, Aurora said.

Are you sure?

It's fine. Honest. I love your shirt, by the way.

Thank you.

You know I actually saw them with Melvins back in ninety three. Helluva show. Blew the speakers out.

Wow that's cool. How old are you?

Old enough, Aurora laughed. That was around the same time I started to figure out the whole gender thing. I was in a band back then. Started wearing makeup and dresses onstage. Melody Maker said we were provocative. But that was years ago. The less you know, the better. Anyways. You work there, or?

Just started a couple weeks ago. Moved up from Florida last summer. Then I fell out with the girls from my Discord. Haven't really met anyone around here yet.

Well, you just met me, so. There you go.

The waitress brought them coffee. Jane took a few sips then topped her mug off with some whiskey from a flask. Sorry for just unloading all that on you, she said.

Oh don't worry. You got nothing to be sorry for.

I just know I can be a lot sometimes.

That's fine. We don't have to talk about it.

Thanks. You said you were in a band? Which one?

If I told you I'd blow my cover, Aurora said. We were pretty famous though. Then it all fell apart.

Doesn't it always?

Jane used to play in a garage punk band with her old roommates until some dumb crap went down. Bands are such bullshit, she said. You're really better off going solo. Lately Jane was taking a DIY approach, multitracking on her laptop with Ableton. Like Car Seat Headrest.

Who the fuck is Car Seat Headrest?

Aurora honed in on her lo-fi attitude and rattled off a bunch of band names like Jesus Lizard, Guided by Voices, Pavement, Built to Spill, Breeders, Silver Jews. Then someone played This Night Has Opened My Eyes

by The Smiths on the jukebox and they gushed for fifteen minutes straight about Johnny Marr.

They're such a perfect band, Jane said. Like, fuck Morrissey, obviously. God. He's such an incel. But I love his voice. It's kind of perfect.

I'm sorry... uh, incel? What's that?

Uhm like a hardcore virgin. Someone no sane person would want to fuck who blames it all on society.

Oh, right, like Billy Corgan. But that's what makes him so good, though. We've all been there before.

I guess, she laughed.

You ever listen to Low?

No but I've heard of them. They're local, I think.

Yeah they've been around about twenty seven years? They're the only good band left. I just saw they got a new album coming out soon. Really hope I can catch them live this time.

Aurora took her back to her studio and showed off all of her guitars. I used to have more, she said, but I had to leave most of them behind when... She hunched over on the old computer chair in her cardigan, cleared her throat and played. Candy says, she sang, I've come to hate my body... And all that it requires in this world... She passed Jane the Stratocaster.

That sounds familiar... What song was that?

The Velvets? The Velvet Underground? John Cale, Lou Reed...

Ah. Okay. I think I've only heard, uh, the one with the banana.

With Nico? Oh God. Girl. Here. I've got to give you some tapes. You got like a boombox or something? Or a WalkMan? I think I got one in a drawer around here...

Aurora became something like her mentor over the next couple of months. Jane's demos were decent but she really needed an ensemble. Her guitar parts were solid but the rhythm section lacked dynamics. Like, you're good, she said, but people play better off of each other.

Sure, but like, I don't know anyone.

That's just punk rock though. You've got to make connections and shit happen, I don't know. What are the kids on these days, Lex?

Ew, no. Lex is for tenderqueers and theyfabs.

...I didn't understand any of those words.

Hm. Okay. It's like. People who make assumptions? Based on identity?

...Have you ever used Lex?

No, I...

So who's making assumptions about who? Hmm? Look. You're gonna have to learn to network, whether you like it or not. How the fuck are you gonna tour?

But I don't wanna tour. I just wanna make music.

Do you wanna make money off this? Then start a band. Shit. Sorry. I didn't mean to get so worked up. Don't let me tell you how to live your life. I just don't want you getting screwed the way I did.

The truth is Jane was jealous. Every other night was a cavalcade of big indie names she'd read about on Pitchfork. As a bartender you got to listen to the show but you aren't ever really there. It's just another shift.

Most nights was an endless stream of drunk pricks with bad breath and expensive looking girlfriends and the most boring taste in music yelling stupid drink orders at her. Last week it was Arcade Fire. Which, like, they're fine. But the way these guys gush about the most mediocre bullshit... also, wasn't their singer a sex pest or something? Beck was supposed to be opening for them, but he pulled out, which sucked. Jane would much rather be listening to Midnite Vultures than Funeral.

If that wasn't bad enough, Jane said, some guy followed me into the bathroom and tried to grab my ass.

I'm so sorry, Aurora said, that's fucked.

Right? I fucking hate men.

But her paychecks were bigger than any other job she'd ever worked. For the first time in her life she had money saved up. Eventually that spring they discovered it would be irresistibly cheap to rent a house together. Aurora proposed they could turn the basement into a venue. It was spacious enough, plus she had connections. So they made it happen.

The first time those older women came over Jane got scared. They were all so much bigger than her. Muscular. Covered in piercings and tattoos with different parts of their heads shaved, most of them flagging red or black.

You trust these girls? Jane said.

Of course I trust them. They helped me get clean.

Jane stayed upstairs drinking in her room for the first couple of shows they threw or got drunk elsewhere. All these kids coming through, so much younger than her, so much deeper in the scene. Their first show was fun at first but the pit scared the shit out of her. Too many bodies. Nowhere to go but upstairs.

Aurora found Jane's head in the toilet. You alright? Her cheek rested on a pile of puke. Oh. Poor girl. She washed her up and tucked her into bed. Jane stirred.

Gmmhgm. Why does my mouth taste like shit.

Because you threw up and passed out.

Mphmnsh, Jane slurred. Just like Jimi Hendrix.

Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, John Bonham, Bon Scott. Many such cases. Let me get you some water.

When Aurora returned Jane was asleep. She had rolled to face the wall. Aurora sat beside her, pet her head and woke her. She handed her a cup. Drink this, she said, or you'll regret it in the morning.

Jane mumbled something and downed the glass. When she woke up she couldn't remember anything.

I feel like shit, she said. What happened?

Aurora was making eggs and grits and bacon and brewing coffee. You were pretty fucked up last night.

They made out once early on in their friendship but sex was out of the question. Aurora was twice her age, for one. Besides, she knew from experience she couldn't sleep with any of her friends without falling in love or making shit weird. I don't want to get too emo, she said. It's kind of embarrassing. Instead, she was writing a concept album to map out her feelings.

Aurora gave her a bunch of old copies of Rolling Stone magazines to make collages out of. Oh, these are so cool, Jane said. I fucking love grunge. Oh my God look.

Oh yeah... Is that the Eddie Vedder issue?

Holy shit this is loaded. Inside the gates of Paisley Park? Marilyn Manson's Antichrist Superstar?

They did cuddle and watch movies sometimes. Platonically, of course. Aurora had a lot of old tapes and an old forty inch Sony CRT TV. You don't understand, Jane said, girls my age just don't get what makes these special. They dismiss it as lower resolution, and it is, but it's not just that. The way the phosphor light blends the pixels, it looks so clean. It's just a trick of the light but it works. You can't get that in HD. She hooked up her old PlayStation and taught her how to play Tekken and Twisted Metal and Rival Schools. It was such a lovely summer. They smoked a lot of pot and ordered a bunch of Thai food and pizza, talking for hours about nothing. The sun reflected off all the amps and posters bathing them in orange. At night they would open all the windows and fall asleep listening to the cicadas.

Have you ever seen this one? Aurora said. Heavy Metal Parking Lot. We used to watch this all the time on tour. These guys with cameras, they go to this Judas Priest show and, like, it's just all these metal meathead motherfuckers talking about how cool they are. Shit's fucking hilarious. Like, they're kinda homophobic, but in a gay way, you know?

They fell asleep that night in each other's arms. When Jane woke up Aurora was downstairs crying in the kitchen. Hey. Are you okay? She cracked open a beer.

No, not really. Just found out my ex wife has cancer. Oh.

Yeah. Apparently it's terminal.

Shit.

She still lives in Los Angeles. I dunno, I haven't talked to her in so long... I just. I don't know what to do.

Well, what can you do? Jane said. It sucks, but it isn't your fault. People don't give other people cancer.

I mean. Except for the government. Nuclear power. Raytheon. People who put chemicals in things.

Maybe you should go visit her.

I can't, Aurora said, she thinks I'm dead. Besides, I'm off the grid. I can't fly. I'd have to drive there.

Maybe we could make a road trip out of it.

Maybe. I don't know.

Could be fun. I've always wanted to visit California.

It's LA. You ever listen to Ratt? Guns N' Roses? Mötley Crüe?

Well. If you need someone to talk to.

Thanks. I'll keep that in mind. Actually. You mind doing the dishes tonight? I'm just...

You don't have to explain, Jane said. I got you.

The days were getting darker now. Eventually they had to take all the window units down. Jane started dating a bass player she met at an Ian MacKaye tribute night. Local bands took turns playing covers of Minor Threat and Fugazi. In the spirit of straight edge they didn't serve any alcohol so her shift was easy. Said bassist ordered a root beer and they talked for a while how alcohol was evil and bullshit. He called it, Like, an opiate for the masses. I mean, look where they put the most liquor stores, he said. Same as the pawn and gun shops. All the poor parts of town. It's socially mandated suicide.

He never pried too much about her dysphoria, aside from the one time he asked her how she wanted to be touched. She said she wasn't sure, so he told her they could take it slow and figure it out as they went along.

Maybe she didn't hate men after all. Maybe only some of them. Not this one.

They started jamming together. His brother was a decent drummer and got in on their practices. It seemed natural. Jane took lead and they filled in the blank space. She didn't have to worry about songwriting anymore. It just kind of happened. She could focus on writing lyrics.

You should play a show here, Aurora said.

Wouldn't that be, like, a conflict of interest?

We're punks, for fuck's sake. Who gives a shit? We ain't corporate rock whores. That's just what punks do. We make a space for others. It's community. Most of all I just wanna know what y'all sound like. It just isn't fair. You've probably heard my band lots of times before.

Oh, yeah. What was their name again?

The week after that Jane came home really drunk one night and found her sprawled over the covers in her bed with the door open and the TV was on. Aurora must have had passed out watching Nirvana MTV Unplugged in New York. Jane listened to a bit of a Meat Puppets cover, then turned it off and tucked Aurora in.

A bottle of whiskey rolled out from the covers onto the carpet with a thud. Jane recognized it as the same one she kept hidden in the dresser in her closet. The label was fucked up from where she picked at it. She rolled Aurora over on her side. Just in case. Then she flicked the light switch and left.

The couple crashing in the basement were yelling at each other in the kitchen downstairs. Someone threw a glass and screamed. Jane locked herself in the bathroom. She took a piss and a big swig from the bottle, winced, then poured the rest of it down the toilet.

HURT.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN WRONG, BUT THEY KNEW NO ONE ELSE would understand their love and agreed to keep it secret. After all, the heart wants what it wants. A poet said that.

Mommy was vicious already, but the forbidden nature of their relationship only made her crazier. She couldn't stop herself fucking her, stretching her hole to the point she could slip right in without any effort.

Tell me how bad you need it, she said. Beg for me.

Her cock was much too good to be true. Mommy must have loved her, truly. All the drugs and toys and the expensive dog bed she made her sleep in. Here, take these, she said. Helps with the pain. Her daughter downs them with beer. What do you say now?

Thank you mommy.

Ashe is sixteen years old and she's already well aware how much acid has probably damaged her brain. These days it's hard to distinguish imagination from memory. Flickering lights have her eyes bugging out in time to the music. She barely makes it to the bathroom to vomit.

Use your words, you slut.

She rattled the locked door and mewed profusely.

Poor little thing. Is your diaper wet?

Mommy let her out to piss in the yard but when she was making up her bed for naptime she found a pocket knife beneath her pillow. How'd that get there? Further inspection revealed cuts on the insides of her thighs. Mommy hadn't put those there.

Bad girl, she spansks her hard, very bad girl, again, then flips her over. You know why mommy hurts you?

Mmmfnnmfnnf, she said through a pair of panties.

So you don't have to hurt yourself. Mommy can do that for you. That's what mommies are for. She carved a heart into her side and watched it weep. Do you feel that? Can you feel how much I love you?

Mmmfmgmh. Mggghgfm? Ashe spat the panties out. Her throat was raw from trying to scream. Do you think we could take a little break?

Not yet. Mommy needs to come.

Please I'm so tired.

I don't care.

Please.

I can give you something to knock you out.

You want to keep fucking me while I'm still asleep?

If that's okay with you.

That sounded pretty hot. Okay.

Ashe loved the cool pinprick of light where the needle pierced her pallid flesh. Warmth washing over until there was nothing more than gentle wavering sleep.

Her dreams were always rocking back and forth, but something else was waking her up now. Lights bloomed. Bright. Mommy was naked being pinned against a wall. A familiar clicking sound, glint of silver where her wrists met. Deep voices emanating flashlight glare strong hands up and over beep hiss as voices were drawing into focus. Then it all went black again.

I think he's awake now, said a shape.

Do you know where you are? said another.

She turns her head slow and remembers these colors.

Hospital.

See? I told you so, dad said. Fucking queers.

Peter. Language.

That's just what he gets. Hope he learned his lesson. Running around a crowd like that.

They brought her some old clothes from home. Jeans and a t-shirt, a size or two too big.

Perverts, ought to be shot, the whole lot of them.

Can we please just, her stepmom said.

I saw on Fox they were talking about them. Estrogen pills; it's mind control. Like the CIA used to do in Vietnam. You ever read about MKUltra?

He's still alive, thank God. Isn't that enough?

That night her dad shaved her head. He nicked her a couple of times around her neck and ears, on purpose.

She cried herself to sleep that night. It was starting to dawn on her what had happened.

Ashe came to her senses in the summer. She finished up high school remotely. Swallowed her pride. Everyone understood, or claimed to. She'd been through so much they couldn't understand. Her dad finally took her to take her driving test as a reward.

Way to go, champ. Dad pat her on the back. She stared at an unfamiliar name and face on the temporary license and felt nothing.

These are yours, now.

Dad.

No, go on. You deserve it.

She felt the weight of the keychain between her fingers and clutched them like jewels with the squishy eight-ball nestled in the palm of her hand. She smiled gently and said You shouldn't have. It was all an act, of course. Ashe had been biding her time a while now.

She gripped the hammer a little tighter in her hand. She could hear dad snoring from her bedroom on the second floor. She knew from peeking in the nights before they both slept with their backs to the doorway. Perfect.

There was so much blood. The crack of bone woke mom up. She saw her husband's head caved in then screamed before the lights went out.

Ashe.

She had fallen asleep again with the TV on.

Ashe wake up. He nudged her. A bag of Doritos spilled from her stomach onto the floor.

It's your turn to do clean the bathroom. And how many times do I have to tell you to take off your shoes.

That girl from the house show last night was staring up from her book, catching her eyes every now and then. She asked her if she wanted a beer. After she was done cleaning up they stepped outside to smoke a cigarette.

Remind me your name again?

Rosemary. But you can just call me May. You?

It's Willow, she said. They blew smoke from the rooftop into the polluted gray of night. There was a riot or something. Fires raged on the horizon. Helicopters circle the scene downtown, searchlights flashing brightly. The snow had deafened their roar.

You from around these parts?

Lived here my whole life. May pulled her jacket tighter. Probably come to die in this town. She shivered. You know, I feel like I've seen your face before.

Oh, probably. Was it a YouTube video?

Yeah... You look like this poor kid who, uh. Gosh. It was kind of messed up. I don't know...

The missing boy who killed his parents. And the kiddie porn ring, or whatever they called it. That one?

Oh. Yeah. Willow couldn't read May's face. Oh my gosh I'm so sorry, she said. That's just awful.

It's okay. It's been years. I'm kinda over it.

They stood in silence for a while.

Sorry for asking. But I'm curious. How could you...

Willow shrugged. It was easy, actually. There's a lot that documentary doesn't tell you no one ever knew. My dad used to beat the shit out of me, for one. He was worried I'd turn out gay like my older brother. And my stepmom, she meant well, but she kinda just let it all happen. You know my uncle used to touch me? When I told her she said I was lying, made me go to confession with him. He's a good Christian man, she said. Couldn't wrap her head around a priest molesting a kid, let alone her own. Willow paused. I can stop, if it's too much.

No, go on, May said. I'm listening. If it helps.

I know it seems fucked up, and maybe it was wrong, but Angela really got me. We met on Plenty of Fish of all places. Of course I lied about my age, but who doesn't? Really, that was the only place I could be myself, the internet. She saw me for who I was when no one else would. I used to write her in prison. Before she hung herself. That really hurt. We were still in love, you know.

Love? Really? Is that what you'd call it?

That's what it felt like. It wasn't traumatic.

But she... I'm sorry... You were a minor.

I was a teenager. Okay? I was old enough to make my own mistakes. Besides, she never did anything with me I didn't ask for in the first place.

How can you even say that? It was wrong. Period.

You said you wanted to listen.

Can we talk about something else instead?

She locked herself upstairs and smoked a bowl and scratched at her arms until a knock came at the door.

Hey it's locked.

I know that. Look. Just give me a second.

I need to go to bed. I've got work in the morning.

Oh shoot I'm sorry I didn't know that. One second.

She gathered herself real quick and opened.

The fuck? Have you been smoking weed in here?

Maybe just little.

Are you fucking serious. We talked about this.

It's just weed. What's the big deal? You're drunk.

What's the big deal? I've told you before you need to get your shit together because you're starting to cause a lot of problems around here.

Okay.

You can't live like this. Always high as shit.

Whatever. She left and clambered down the stairs, pulling out the couch bed, Slipped beneath the blankets, shivered, then rolled onto her side. For a while Willow considered suicide. It wouldn't be hard. Just get drunk and walk into the snow. She wouldn't feel a thing. No one would stop her. But after a while she decided against it. She didn't want to give anyone the satisfaction.

She heard footsteps behind her.

May? Is that you? No answer. May? Someone, something slipped beneath the covers. Fingertips like ice ran down her back. Hot breath on the back of her neck.

Relax, she thought. It would all be over soon.

A hand slipped up beneath her well worn TOOL shirt, cupping at her budding breast. She closed her eyes and waited. Then, after a while, there was warmth.

CLOSE.

SHE TURNED THE KEYS AND OPENED DAD'S LIQUOR CABINET.

See? my sister said. I told you he was loaded.

No shit.

Should we. You know.

She came back from the kitchen with Garfield mugs.

Only clean cups I could find, Jackie said.

It still smelled the same like when we were kids. Linen candles and hot carpet, wallpaper glue and Lysol, cigarette smoke seeped deep into the tacky wood paneling. Framed posters for eighties teen movies and Labyrinth faded from the sun adorned the walls.

Jackie motioned to the Precious Moments figurines lining the entertainment center, coated in dust. You remember mom was wondering what happened to these?

Probably kept them just to piss her off. Like this. There was a photo album we remembered getting her years ago. The adults had all been cut from the pictures leaving only the children. We put it back immediately.

The funeral was short and uneventful, thank God. About as many people showed up as you'd expect for a

registered sex offender. Mostly just some other veterans. No one wanted to broach the reality of his life or death. They opted for a gentler revision of the actual events. Then we committed his body to the dirt.

One week has passed since the will was read and keys were handed over. We were still trying to figure out what to do with the house.

This old place gives me creeps, I said.

I'm not sure why. No one ever got molested here.

That's not very funny.

The silence was starting to get to us. Rose blew the dust from the CD player and turned it on.

Seriously? Jackie laughed. Rose, check this out.

What?

I recognized the jewel case.

You should put it on.

Really?

She nodded. Oh, well. Whatever makes her happy. I put the disc in and turned it up as loud as I could stand.

The first song on Physical Graffiti is called Custard Pie and it's a metaphor for pussy. If you think that sounds disgusting, well, that's Led Zeppelin for you. They were monsters.

When you're a teenager and the only CDs that haven't been bought for you belong to your parents, and they're a certain kind of parent—in other words: white, upper class, peaked in the eighties, etc.—Led Zeppelin sound like the coolest shit you've ever heard in your life. You don't know about their crimes. You're not thinking about plagiarism or cultural appropriation or racism or rape or that one time Jimmy Page kept his fourteen year old girlfriend locked in a hotel room for a year because you haven't read about it yet. Even if you had it would've only further cemented their mythic nature because you're ten and people only did that kind of crap in bad jokes or episodes of South Park, so what would you believe? Besides, they kicked ass. Have you seen *The Song Remains the Same*? Those aren't men playing overblown blues standards on your TV. At least, that's not how they're framed. They were rockstars. Gods. Zeppelin were evil, yes, but this was only a side effect of rock 'n' roll divinity. What did morality matter to them? Like Odin or Zeus their status transcended the realms of mortal decency. Led Zeppelin could fill a double album full of b-sides and open it with a song about pussy called Custard Pie because when you're the greatest rock band in the world you can do whatever the fuck you want.

And they were damn good at it, too. They sounded bigger, heavier, more badass than anything else from the seventies; aside from Sabbath, of course. It was fucking awesome. Thinking back, I kind of hate it.

Jimmy Page sings, See me comin', throw your man out the door. I ain't no stranger, I been this way before.

She's drunk already and dancing like a jackass in that same oversized Metallica shirt she's had since she was, like, seventeen, the one big enough she wears it like a dress, sleeves cut off, faded gray and threadbare, riddled with cigarette burns and reeking of pot smoke. Belting out the lyrics at the top of her lungs. Cute. Meanwhile I'm trying to think how many boxes we're gonna need for all this crap. I look up the closest Home Depot and pour myself another half a mug of whiskey.

Think I'm gonna take a look around, I said.

I found my room untouched and flopped out on the bed, sending up a plume of dust. Everything was exactly where we left it seventeen years ago. Piles of homework, fast food wrappers, scattered school supplies, pieces of candy, the crusty sock on the floor. The mattress was a lot smaller than I remembered. My arms and legs dangle awkwardly off the sides. Maybe I had grown? Naturally, I didn't linger very long.

Jackie's room, on the other hand, looked completely different. It was empty except for a single cot, some pornographic magazines, a big pump bottle of lotion and assorted wads of tissue. It smelled like a locker room.

She came by as I was shutting the door behind me.

You do not want to go in there, I said.

C'mon, what's up?

It's fucking disgusting.

What do you mean?

Dad turned your bedroom into a goon cave.

Wow. That is...

I know, right?

Yeah, no, now I really gotta see this.

You sure you wanna... and she pushed right past me.

Looking around she shrugged. That's it? she said. Really? What is it with men. So boring. I swear. It's all so utilitarian. She gestured towards the laptop charger dangling from the wall, the wireless mouse on the carpet. Where's the laptop?

Probably got taken in for evidence.

Hey, Rose, check this out, she said. She was flipping through the magazines in the corner. Worn out titty rags with gross names like Barely Legal Teeny Boppers or Chicks with Dicks.

We ought to get a bin or two, I said. We really need to start sorting through what we're going to save and what we're going to burn.

I could take these, she said, gesturing at the porno mags. I got a friend who does zines, I think she would get a lot of use out of them. Jackie lit another cigarette. She's transgender, she said, like you. Very pretty.

Sure she wouldn't mind the sticky pages?

Okay, that's fair, Jackie said. Maybe we ought to go through and see which ones he cummed in.

We were both already quite exhausted. Jackie rolled us a blunt. She pulled out another CD from the shelf. Remember when mom got him this?

Oh my god! He was so fucking pissed! I dropped my voice in a mock imitation. I already got three of these god damn greatest hits! You can't give that shit away!

David Bowie was singing about how your mother doesn't know if you're a boy or a girl. I can't help but think about the yearslong coke bender where he ate nothing but milk and peppers, barely slept, recording five albums between LA and Berlin without any memory of their creation. Around the same time he becomes obsessed with Aleister Crowley and Nazi occultism and starts developing The Thin White Duke as a character.

Was he actually a fascist, or just his persona? David Bowie claimed it was theater but is there any distinction, especially when it comes to method acting? The song itself is undoubtedly fascist in structure, obsessed with the false illusion of its own perfection. The same riff repeats itself for four minutes and twenty seconds straight. It doesn't change, there's no solos, just a single note at the end of each verse before it starts again. But it's such a powerful riff. Bar jukebox meathead mentality distilled. Nary a karaoke night goes by some drunk jackoff doesn't try to sing it. Rebel Rebel isn't merely a reflection of its idealism but an embodiment of this very perception, a madness not unfamiliar to any addict with a romantic streak and a love for the dramatic.

Sorting out my thoughts I begin to put them into words, but Jackie's too busy having fun to listen or even care. All she wants to do is dance. That's okay. Let her.

I like the next song better. Young Americans. It's all right there in the title. Bowie was obsessed with youth. All those underage groupies, his constant changes to counteract the passage of time. Staring at that poster for Labyrinth, all the makeup. The feathered hair. He looks like he wishes he were Siouxsie Sioux. I remember him in a dress on the cover for The Man Who Sold the World.

I think you think too much, Jackie said.

Why do you say that?

Because you've been staring at the wall for like half an hour.

Shit. What time is it? My stomach growled.

You hungry?

I got a bar in my bag I was gonna...

How about we order some pizza?

Jackie took her phone out and started looking what was open nearby. What were you thinking about?

Oh. Uh. Just music.

Yeah?

I mean. I've got that deadline coming up...

You ever think about. Like. Playing music? Instead of just writing about it? What was that book of yours about again?

Seventies glam rock through a queer perspective.

It was a book of essays for a fairly well known New York publishing house. Mostly design work and editing, but I did have a piece on The Kinks.

Do you want a guitar? I have a guitar. Remember dad had that amp in the attic?

Jackie.

You could probably write a better song than any of those old fucks. Remember you used to write poetry? Why did you ever stop? I thought it was beautiful.

That's the thing about poetry. It's just artifice. Bunch of pretty words. There's no plot.

What about fiction?

I don't care about shit that never really happened.

See. Like I said. You think too much. She returned to her phone. How about a pepperoni and mushroom a Hawaiian?

We turned on the TV and The Breakfast Club was playing. I used to hate the ending, what they did to Allison. Back in college I wrote a whole essay on it, how it was sexist or something, but now? I wish someone would make me up like that. You transition and realize goth is just what's easy. All black baggy clothing, messy hair, no fucks given about your appearance. It's less a desire to dress yourself a certain way and more something of necessity. An easy way to hide yourself.

When the pizza arrives Simple Minds are telling me not to forget about them. The credits roll by, then get squished off to the side and a slightly less squished Ferris Bueller's Day Off starts playing. Must have been John Hughes' birthday or something.

Oh fuck yes this one is my favorite, Jackie said, mouth full of mush, cracking open another beer.

She fell asleep on the couch during a commercial break halfway through. I took the empty bottle dangling precariously from her hand and set it on the floor beside her. Jackie had mentioned the attic earlier. We weren't allowed to go up there when we were little but dad used to hide away for hours practicing guitar. I always wondered what it looked like, but there wasn't really anything to see aside from fiberglass insulation. Then I noticed the noose dangling from the rafters. The amp Jackie had mentioned earlier stood beneath it like a foot stool. In the corner was a pile of empty boxes of wine.

There was a stack of Polaroids nearby. I picked them up, flipped through a few with trembling fingers, then dropped them. They were faded and blurry but distinct in their subject. My dad was dressed in drag. Garters, wigs, high heels, corsets, makeup. They were meant to be erotic. In a few of them he's showing hole.

I went downstairs and poured myself another glass of wine. Jackie must have heard me and came in to check up. She could tell something was the matter. My hands were shaking badly.

What's wrong? Jackie said. Talk to me.

Tears start falling from my eyes. It came on so overwhelming I didn't even notice her embrace at first. Then I leaned into her.

Your hair smells nice.

Thanks, she said. It's just my conditioner.

I can't remember how or why we started making out. Maybe I was stuck on the memory of when we were kids, the first time mom and dad let us stay here alone. The pizza was different, but the vibe was the same. We used to play Barbies and make them kiss and act naughty. Of course, this came to its natural conclusion.

Hey, she said. You ever kissed a girl?

I shook my head. Have you?

Lotsa times, she said.

What's it like?

Wanna find out?

Years later she was back in town from film school for the summer. That night she showed me her dubbed VHS copy of Superstar, the Todd Haynes student film about Karen Carpenter. I think she was trying to shock me, the same way I used to load up Vice City and blow the heads off of sex workers, or the way she'd retaliate by walking around the house naked. It was kind of our thing. When I was seven she showed me American

Werewolf in London. That movie really fucked me up. I had nightmares about it for months. Not even the obvious body horror stuff; the rotting ghost puppet who keeps telling his friend to kill himself.

What are you, chicken?

She shook the bottle at me, mockingly.

I probably wouldn't have gotten into the Carpenters if she hadn't showed me Superstar. Like I wouldn't have gotten into Sonic Youth if I hadn't heard their cover in Juno afterward, then sought out their song for Karen on Goo. When she heard me listening to that she turned me on to Irma Vep. Naturally, I became obsessed with film. We watched Safe and Velvet Goldmine off her hard drive, then I started hounding libraries for DVDs of his contemporaries: Jarman, Gregg Araki, Gus Van Sant... But for some reason I always came back to Todd Haynes.

Superstar is such a disturbing film. Haynes takes the much maligned format of historical TV dramatization and mines the uncanny valley therein. Family as a death sentence, corroding the self like the amplified black levels carve away at the image. For the longest time I just assumed it was visual degradation from the tape rip until I saw a screening on film at the local arthouse theater. I've never seen such brutal use of negative space. Even in

such a crowded room the sense of isolation is tangible. Haynes would further explore these themes in *Safe*, but *Superstar* renders them so murky yet crystalline, in the same way molded plastic can stand in for a human being.

My childhood couldn't have been more different than Karen Carpenter's but felt so painfully familiar. We moved around a lot so by the time we finally did settle down all the kids we met had already settled into their friend groups. For a while, we only had each other.

I didn't mention how me and Jackie used to practice kissing with each other in the essay I wrote about *Superstar* all those years later for my film class. Mostly just focused on the incestuous undertones of the film and surrounding queer theory. Why is incest so widely frowned upon? We're not supposed to fuck our family, but gays do it all the time with their chosen ones. What do they know that we don't? We're supposed to love our families. Shouldn't we long to be intimate with the ones we love the most? What's so wrong about that?

AV Club paid me fifty dollars for the essay but much to my chagrin they never ran it. Probably because of all the incest stuff. Maybe it's for the best. This was well before I'd learned to use a pen name. I can only imagine what anyone would've made of it.

I used the money to buy her knock-off Demonias for Christmas. She hugged me tight and said I was the coolest sister ever. She smelled so sweet and warm, like cinnamon. I melt into her arms like butter. I missed this more than anything, and now I'm back there again.

Your skin's so soft, she said.

We pulled away from each other, drunk and dazed.

I really shouldn't have kissed you. This is wrong.

Says who. It feels nice.

We don't have to do this, you know.

I want it though, she said. I've wanted you so long.

She put her hand on mine, still resting on her thigh. My skirt was pulled up my leg exposing my panties. There was nowhere left to hide my erection.

Me too, but. Really, we shouldn't.

What's the worst that could happen? You told me you're sterile. You can't get me pregnant.

Sis... I could smell her getting wet.

You're blushing.

What if someone finds out about us?

Jackie smiled. Her hand wrapped around my cock. Don't overthink it, she said. She hangs above me, drawing ever closer, until our lips are almost touching. You're the only one who knows.

REAL.

I.

WINTER THAWS INTO SLUSH. FRANCES REINSTALLED TINDER. Loneliness had grown unbearable in those frigid months ever since the motor in her Hitachi Magic Wand burned out. Money had been tight, but ever since that other girl got fired she had more hours and a bigger paycheck. She could probably afford to have a girlfriend again.

Dani got butterflies the moment they matched. Frances messaged first, calling her cute. She was so busy blushing she didn't even notice her stop passing by.

Late again. I'm sorry but I've got no other choice, her supervisor said. I'm going to have to write you up. We can't keep making exceptions.

Dani cried for a while in the bathroom, then got to work in the movie section. She needed to wrap security tags around a new shipment of box sets. The wire always dug into the packaging, leaving tiny notches at the corner of every side. The tags were more a deterrent than anything. They didn't stop people from snipping them off with scissors and leaving them in toilets.

Sorry, Dani said, I hope I'm not boring you.

No, you're fine, Frances said. She set her hand on top of hers and smiled. Honest.

Enough about me, let's talk about you for a minute. You said you were a writer?

I mean, yeah... more or less...

What kind of stuff do you write?

Smut, mostly. Frances told her a bit about the novel she had been working on, beginning with some content warnings. Rape, suicide, addiction, murder, incest...

Sounds pretty dark, Dani said.

Life is dark. So that's what I write.

I see. Seems... I dunno, bleak? It's complicated.

People are complicated. What I write is complicated. Because really, I just want to write something real. Something with meaning. Like, I can't have children, you know? I never froze my sperm, so writing's all I've got to survive me. You ever heard of Derek Jarman?

No, I can't say I have...

Oh, he's brilliant. Extremely gay and British. Mid seventies through ninety three? Died of AIDS. Beautiful, beautiful stuff. Very theatrical, but experimental. His last film was called Blue, and it's just a single blue screen with him talking about being gay and dying from AIDS. He lost his eyesight to AIDS, so all he saw at the end was

shades of blue. It's heartbreaking. But, I've been thinking a lot lately about the movie he made before that. *The Garden*. Tilda Swinton's in that. She was in a lot of his other stuff, too. There's not really any plot. It's more about mood and theme. Kinda avant garde. Like, what queers do in place of having kids. I mean, you can adopt, maybe, but for a lot of queers it isn't really an option. So we make shit up because we can't procreate otherwise.

I've been thinking a lot these days about something Jean-Luc Godard once said in an interview. What's your greatest ambition in life? they asked him. His response: To become immortal, then die.

This was only their second date but she already noticed herself changing the way she always changed for everyone she dated. When she was with Prim she became obsessed with grindcore and skramz. Most of her ex's favorite albums were all under twenty minutes long. Perfect. Just enough time to chug a beer, hop in the shower, throw on clothes and catch the bus. A week before their breakup Frances spent seventy dollars on a first pressing of *Orchid's Dance Tonight! Revolution Tomorrow!* It was a lot of cash for only fifteen minutes of music, but she really did believe it would bring them closer together in the end. She was right. For fifteen minutes at a time it felt like they'd never broken up.

Dani downed the rest of her coffee and watched a bible study group trickle in through the door. The patio was getting crowded and loud. Smoke began to fill the air. In their fawning they hadn't noticed the sun had set.

Let's go back to my place, Frances said.

Sure, Dani smiled. She took her by the leash.

Starting along the crosswalk a silver Tesla ran a red light nearly running them both over. Asshole! Frances shouted. Dani squeezed her hand a little tighter.

They made out for a little while on the bridge overlooking the interstate. Dani was aggressive. Sharp nails, lots of teeth. Frances loved it. God you're so fucking hot, she said, grabbing her ass. It sounded stupid, but probably only because she was drunk. Obviously Dani was starstruck. C'mon, Frances said, I'm just a couple blocks away. Intrusive thoughts kept creeping back into her mind, beckoning her to mount the guardrail and throw herself over the fence into the late night traffic. She closed her eyes and imagined the sound of her body smashing into the concrete, tires screeching to avoid the gore, Dani screaming. Pretty sick.

Natalie Celeste Tautou shut her eyes, closed her laptop, then poured herself another glass of water. She swallowed an Advil with another Adderall. The deadline for submissions was tomorrow at midnight. She wanted

to give herself plenty of time to go through and edit her story before then but her eyes were already glossing over. She went to the turntable and lifted the needle from the runout groove on Side B of Boards of Canada's Music Has the Right to Children. It had been clicking and trailing dust for about ten minutes now.

The door creaked and slammed from the other side of the wall. Suppressed giggles from the hallway as the lock clicked and the chain slid into place behind them. Natalie checked the time and sighed. She slid the record back in its sleeve and set the second disc onto the platter.

Natalieeee, the voice sang, I'm home early...

I know. She dropped the needle on the record and faked a smile. Someone was with her, maybe non binary? Natalie couldn't tell their gender just from looking.

Her apartment was about as cramped as a packed house in Animal Crossing. Just enough room between everything to walk from one spot to another but not much else.

Mind if we talk for a second? Natalie said.

Sure.

They stepped into the kitchen. Dishes and bowls piled up unwashed in the sink, reeking of sour milk. Sorry, Natalie said, got a bit of a headache right now... Think you two can keep it down tonight?

Sure, I mean... she took her sister by the jaw, looked over her face like a mother to her dirty child and wiped a spot of purple-white powder from beneath her left nostril. You've been snorting Adderall again, she said.

Not much, just. Trying to get this draft done.

You know how I feel about that.

I know. It won't be like last time, I promise.

Think you can clean up in here before bed at least?

I'll see what I can do.

Thank you. She kissed her sister on the lips. You're a good girl, you know. Don't try too hard.

They didn't keep it down. She could still hear them fucking through the walls even with her headphones on.

Natalie grabbed the bottle of whiskey from the freezer, made up the couch and smoked a bowl curled up over her laptop. She was on her second rewatch of Neon Genesis Evangelion this year and she just got to the part where everything became unbearably depressing. She paused in the middle of an explosion and switched over to Revolutionary Girl Utena. There was a rhythm to this show she found comforting. The repetition of her battles. Recycled animation. She passed out with a pipe in one hand and a lighter dangling from her fingers.

Are you alright?

It's nothing, Frances said. Ow. Wait. She clenched and Dani's fingers slid out from her.

Oh shit.

What's wrong?

Dani went into the bathroom. Just some blood, she said, turning on the sink.

Crimson bloomed against the damp gray fibers of the towel underneath her ass. It was a lot more than she was expecting. Frances wiped herself down, leaving a red smear. She felt a knot twisting in her stomach.

Sorry about that, she said, turning on the shower.

It's okay, Dani said, I'm more worried about you.

Frances detached the showerhead and rinsed her anus out. I'm okay, she said. It just happens sometimes.

Like, bleeding out your ass? Dani washed her hands then rinsed her face off in the sink. Does it hurt?

Yeah, a little bit, but that's normal for anal, right? It's supposed to hurt a little.

No, not really. It shouldn't.

Maybe we should warm up more next time.

That was warming up, Dani said. It was one finger. We can do other stuff, you know. Frotting is good.

Frotting is fine, Frances sighed, but I really just want to feel you inside of me.

II.

IN HINDSIGHT SHE WOULD REGRET TAKING SO MUCH ACID. But it seemed like such a good idea at the time. She was on her way to see Inland Empire, for fuck's sake. How could she have known what was about to happen?

Natalie stepped off the bus and into the sludge. The first snows had clashed with some unseasonably warm weather, turning all the sidewalks into miniature skating rinks. Nonslip boots could only do so much.

Juniper Moon was waiting for her at the fish place just a block down from the theater. I've got something for you, Natalie said, and took out some minis of vodka.

Thanks, smiled June, but I don't think I'll need it.

Just save it for later then, okay? June could smell the booze on her breath, and she could make out the red lines on her cheek where she had cut herself shaving.

I've got this, Natalie said.

You sure? I just got paid.

No no no, you bought the tickets, I insist.

They ordered shrimp and fries and took a seat in the booth in the corner. The table was scuffed and worn, just a little bit sticky, seats bleached baby pink over years spent in the sun. It wobbled on uneven feet as they sat and waited patiently for them to call their number.

June caught her up on things. A new relationship, a surgery date, a publishing deal.

Oh that's so exciting. I'm happy for you, really.

Yeah I can't make it official yet, it won't happen for another couple years? They're trying to set me up with an editor. How's your book coming along, by the way?

Honeysuckle? God. Had some really bad writer's block lately. It's been so hard. They've got me closing so by the time I get home I'm too wired to go to sleep and too tired to write, I just drink and watch a movie or play videogames or something. By the time I do go to bed it's so late I sleep in until after noon, and then I gotta go back to work again. It fucking sucks.

That does sound stressful. Well, I do hope you can at least get some rest soon. Or find another job.

June put her hand on hers, but it retracted to her lap. Natalie felt uptight. She drank half her can of Coke, then poured liquor in the can to top it back off. Some balding older man at the counter called out Juniper's deadname. He'd probably gotten it off of her credit card.

Natalie hadn't eaten yet today, unless you counted Hamm's. Beer is food, right? Between that and nicotine withdrawals her hands were shaking badly. She would've smoked earlier but it was just too cold this morning. She would quit, but then she would lose her smoke breaks.

Thankfully she felt a lot better as she ate.

June smiled and said, Thank you.

For what?

For buying me dinner. You're really sweet.

Please. It's no big deal.

I appreciate your kindness. Really. I could've paid.

Don't be ridiculous, Natalie said. You know I would do anything for you. Seriously. You've given me so much. I don't feel like I've done anything to deserve that. I only hope someday I can give back half of what you've given me. No. Wait. I'm so sorry. Don't listen to me. Ha ha. Relationships don't work like that. I'm just being stupid. What the fuck is wrong with me?

June took her by the hand and took a deep breath. Sweetie. I love you a lot. I care about you a lot. But I don't want us to be girlfriends any more.

Oh.

Yeah.

I'm sorry, Natalie said.

You don't have anything to be sorry about. I still want to be your friend, I just...

Please. She withdrew her hand. I don't think I can do this right now.

We can talk, if it helps...

Fuck you.

What?

I said, fuck you. She threw what was left of her fish and chips against the wall. Then her can of Coke.

Natalie!

Why don't I just kill myself? Do us both a favor.

What the fuck? I know you're upset but...

Upset? I'm not upset. Fuck!

Everyone was staring at her when she stormed out. Someone's kid was laughing.

Lucky for her the stop wasn't far up the sidewalk. She caught her bus home just in time. Fingers trembling, she dug into her pants, pulled out her transfer, put it in the slot. The driver nodded and she took a seat in back.

Natalie reached in her pocket for her phone but it wasn't there. So she checked her other pocket, then her bag. Great. Just fucking great. She must have left it at the restaurant.

It took the bus twenty minutes to make it to her stop. By then it was dark and had started snowing again. Her head was aching, making her dizzy. Must be the acid. She puked in the parking lot of a church behind the sign, wiped her mouth on her sleeve, finished off the rest of her Fireball and immediately felt a whole lot better. She threw the bottle into the street and considered the liquor store two blocks away from her apartment. Sleep

wouldn't come easy for her, especially because she was tripping, but she could at the very least still drink herself into unconsciousness, that was always an option. At the very least it would help her feel everything less. It would stop her from wanting to die. Not like it would be very difficult to kill herself. Or maybe it would. It was so hard to tell. Bodies are quite resilient. They don't like to die.

How's your night going? the cashier said.

Not too bad. Just got broken up with.

Oh my, I'm sorry to hear that.

It's whatever. Probably for the best. Wasn't really working out. It's like a divorce. The feeling's mutual.

Mmhm. The cashier checks her ID. Thank you sir, he said. Would you like a bag?

No thanks, I've got my own.

He tries to run her card, then tries again and frowns.

Is something wrong?

It says it's been declined. Do you have another card?

You know what? Just forget about it.

The world was bathed in gray and hush and glow. She heard nothing but the crunch beneath her feet, following the path through a string of latticed geometric hallucinations. A plow truck shoved a wave of sludge around her feet. It soaked through into her socks. Great. Just her luck. Of fucking course.

She fumbled her keys and turned the lock on the door. Hey girl, Frances said. You're back early. Natalie struggled and swung to fling off her coat, bent to untie her boots, then collapsed on the rug and started sobbing. Frances set her laptop aside and went to help her. What's wrong? she set her legs straight and started working at the laces. Did something happen? Snot and spit was dribbling down the front of her sweater. Juniper gave her that sweater. It meant a lot to her. Everything always meant so much on acid. Sometimes it was overwhelming. Hey, babe. I can't help you out if you won't talk to me. You're freezing. Here, c'mon. Frances walked her to the living room. A space heater was perched atop the table next to a pile of empty beer cans and pizza boxes. Let's get you warm. She laid her down and draped a heated blanket over her. Tell you what, she said. I'm going to brew us some tea and you can tell me all about it. How does that sound? Natalie nodded. Frances pulled her cardigan tighter and disappeared into the kitchen.

She was watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Natalie had seen this episode before. It was the one with the aliens who communicate only in allegories. Juniper showed this to her last summer when they did shrooms in the graveyard and had a bad trip. That was the first time Natalie had gone down on her after surgery. Natalie

wasn't just tripping then but drunk as well. She thought it would help her overcome her unspoken fear of neovaginas. She knew it was fucked up to think this way. Internalized transphobia, or something like that. But that was just how she felt at the time. So she said she had to pee, then stole a couple swigs of alcoholic mouthwash from her bathroom to dull her nerves. Not enough to make her puke, but just enough to distance herself from everything she didn't want to be.

There wasn't any left at home this time. She checked behind the mirror, underneath the sink. Nothing. In the glass she saw with dilated eyes all the bruises in her skin dancing beneath the sickly yellow flicker of the lights and remembered she was still tripping, which explained why it was taking so long for her to pee, and also why she had decided to do so in the sink. She turned the water up as hot as it would go to mask the smell, squeezed her dick dry, dabbed it with a towel, then pumped soap all over her hands. It felt good. Her fingers were still cold and a little bit stiff. She ran a washcloth under the water and cleaned the snot and tears and whatever else belied a quiet, calm exterior from her face.

When she got back she heard whistling. It died off when Frances took the kettle from the coil. On the TV Picard recounted the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Sorry, what did you say? Frances must have been talking on the phone. I mean, you're right, but she's family. It's different, you know... No I don't think that's unhealthy. Okay, maybe a little, but this is a crisis situation. Look, we'll talk later, okay? I'll text you tomorrow. Natalie took the bowl on the table and hit it.

Hey, sorry about that, Frances said. She set two cups on the table by the heater. I made you a hot toddy.

Thanks. It smelled delicious. Notes of whiskey lingered beneath the lemon and honey. Her lips glanced the surface. Still too hot to drink. She set it back down on the table and gulped at the lump of metal forming at the back of her throat. I'm okay, by the way. Just had a bit of a panic attack in the theater. There was so many people there.

You should've called. I would've picked you up.

I wanted to. I left my phone back at the theater.

You didn't go back for it?

I'll figure it out tomorrow. She faked a yawn. Right now I just need some sleep, I think.

Okay, sure. Natalie got up to leave. You should take your tea with you, Frances said. So she did.

Natalie locked the door behind her and turned on the light. It bathed her room in a neon glow. She nearly spilled her drink all over herself, then set it on her desk

and checked her laptop. There were a bunch of messages on Discord from Juniper but she didn't want to see them right now so she slammed the screen shut and threw herself onto the bed. The ceiling swirled above her like a storm cloud bristling with lightning. She closed her eyes and saw something staring back she didn't like through the darkness behind them. The clock ticked away on her bookshelf. It was only just now seven but it felt like after midnight. She moved her mug to the windowsill, stripped naked, threw on some old pajamas, and turned on the TV. She was going to watch some Simpsons but every episode she scrolled through reminded her of some joke they used to make or some movie she told her about. Natalie put on some vaporwave instead and downed the tea as fast as she could stand it. It wasn't very strong but every drop of liquor helped.

In the living room Frances was reading a guide to Pokémon breeding on her phone. The TV asked if she was still watching. Lavender town's theme chimed from the DS on the table by her lighter. I thought you were going to bed.

I couldn't sleep, Natalie said. Frances pulled her legs in to make room for her at her feet.

She lay her head on her lap for a while. Gripped her thigh. It wasn't as soft as she remembered. Come to

think of it Natalie hadn't seen her eating much these days. Her foot twitched and knocked one empty beer can into another. Frances ran her fingers through her hair. Slick and oily and matted in spots like she hadn't washed it in a while. When did it get so long? It ran down her back, flowing like a river, always catching onto things. Once upon a time it was dyed hot pink. Now it was only faded blonde at the fringes.

I'm worried about you, Frances said.

There's nothing to worry about.

We both know that isn't true.

Leave me alone, okay?

Are you sure that's what you really need right now?

Fuck off.

You'd probably feel a lot better if you talk about it.

I said fuck off. I told you nothing's wrong.

Okay. Sorry I even asked.

It's whatever.

Natalie repacked the bowl. She offered it to Frances.

I'm good, thank you.

She took a hit, then another. Her head felt a little bit softer now. Dulled at the edges. Maybe she was hungry, but not for food. She turned back at her sister, who looked up at her. Hey, she said.

What's up?

This was the point in the trip where time started skipping like a record, lapsing intervals between one moment into the next. It always felt like forever. Everything seemed to blur. She didn't know how she found herself above her, or their lips locked, but Frances was moaning like she liked it. Maybe struggling? Natalie didn't seem to care. She was ravenous. Besides, she'd read Frances' writing before, all those fantasies of ravishment. She probably wanted this, didn't she? Natalie pinned her arms behind her head, sucking at her tongue, granular and coarse, with her other hand around her throat, then pulled back. Frances gasped and felt her hard on through the blanket. Gripping her neck a little tighter, so her mouth stuck open like a fish. Natalie spit right down her throat, then all the room burned into black like a photograph in a fireplace, blooming void that warped whatever lingered of the afterimage. The room was full of stars. She could hear her heartbeat slowing to a crawl.

It took her a moment to realize Frances wasn't breathing. Was she dead? Oh no. Oh God. She couldn't feel her pulse. As she loosened her hold the body draped over the edge like a rag doll. She's not breathing. She's not moving. She's not coming back. She's fucking dead. No. No no no no no. This can't be happening. It can't be real. Please God don't be real.

Fuck, uh, what do I do now? she thought Natalie pulled her body onto the couch. Use your fucking head. Find a way. She remembered her time in the Boy Scouts. Something one of the Scout Leaders had shown her. It made her feel... She shouldn't be turned on right now. She shouldn't have gotten so fucked up. Think, damn it. She recalled how the older boy set his lips on hers and did the same to her sister. She exhaled into her lungs. Pumped her chest, like he did, all those years ago. What was that song? Ah, ah, ah, ah. Staying alive. Staying alive. You fucking idiot. You killed her, didn't you. Now you have to explain that to everyone. I can't, she thought. I can't do this any more. She blew into her mouth again as hard as she could blow. Frances coughed and sputtered back to life with a jolt. She gasped, tried to scream, but couldn't. Her throat felt sore. It hurt to breathe.

Oh God I'm so sorry, Natalie said.

Gah. Uhm. She blinked again. What?

Promise you won't tell. I'll never touch you again.

What did you do to me?

Natalie started crying. I didn't mean to, I swear.

They sat there for a while in silence until Frances caught her breath and realized what had happened.

I can't do this shit any more, she said. I want you out of here tomorrow. No more excuses.

III.

FRANCES HAD NEVER FUCKED A MAN BEFORE, BUT HOW HARD could it be, really? She had read a couple of books with sex scenes in them. She probably got the gist. Besides, it wasn't like she wasn't attracted to men. She just had a history. Never fucked men, no, but she had been raped a couple times by them. Which was probably why she was so afraid of them in the first place. She tried not to think about it too much. Desperate times and all that.

He was waiting for her just outside Margaritaville on the benches, wearing a Hawaiian shirt with skinny jeans and sky blue Yeezys. The haircut was new and looked expensive. Frances could make out little tufts of brown around his shoulders. His name probably fake, but so was Frances'. She told him it was Lucky. Sounds like a dog name, he said. He was rude, but rich. He claimed to work for a big videogame company and was in town for doing stuff for Awesome Games Done Quick. You know, charity work, tax writeoff crap. They made him sign an NDA. So I can't talk about it much, he said, but if you've ever heard of a little game called Red Dead Redemption... She smiled and sipped the drink he ordered for her. Whoever made the mix went way too strong. It tasted like Everclear with a twist of lime.

Would you like another drink?

No, I. I wouldn't want to take advantage of you.

Please, he smiled. Go on right ahead.

She ate a double Cheeseburger in Paradise with a knife and fork so she wouldn't mess up her makeup. He ordered fried pickles and ribs and chicken tenders and gobbled them down loudly, licking his fingertips, all the while he wouldn't shut up about ayahuasca trips and crypto and meeting Justin Roiland at Comic-Con. You know he just gets, like, blackout drunk and improvises, he said through a mouthful of buttermilk ranch and mush. He's so fucking funny. Frances laughed and smiled and said, That is so cool. I love Rick and Morty. On the other end of the dining room a woman with a parrot hat on her head carried out a tiny cake with a sparkling candle to a family of five. They started singing Happy Birthday.

Thankfully Natalie didn't have to say very much. Just listened, mostly. He paid the bill and said he had to piss. Frances sat in the big beach chair by the surfboard overlooking the entrance. It was late so there weren't many people left around. Across the way was a little bubble tea place with pachinko machines in the window. Frances watched two giggling dykes walking out holding hands. She could tell they were in love when they kissed.

He walked her to his hotel. The lobby was taller than most houses she had lived in and glimmered like Christmas. The suite itself was much more modest. A bed and a couch and a TV on the wall. The furniture looked like IKEA but slightly more expensive. Glossy and minimalist. There was a little bar and he started mixing them some drinks. Frances took off her high heels and stretched her aching feet.

The man took a pair of leather gloves from his bag and slipped them on. I should probably ask what your boundaries are.

What do you mean?

Like. Is there anything you wouldn't do?

I told you before. I'm up for whatever.

But you don't have any hard limits or anything?

Well. You seem like a fairly harmless guy. He passed her a tall glass of something the color of Ecto Cooler. It tasted like a green apple Jolly Rancher.

Is this your first time doing this? he said.

No of course not.

Alright. How much was it you said you were short on rent? Six hundred dollars? He rested his gloved hand on her thigh, up her skirt. That's an awful lot of money.

I know. That's why I wanted to meet you. You told me you wanted to help.

He did a line off the mirror on the coffee table, connected his phone to the Bluetooth speaker and put on some Kanye West song she hadn't heard in years. You didn't think to ask for half up front? he said.

I mean... I didn't want to come off as greedy.

Uh huh. He grabbed his thick designer wallet from his back pocket, opened it up, took out six blue bills. So then you haven't done this before. He clenched the money in his hand. You said you would do anything?

Anything you'd like. I'm all yours.

You're sure about that? he said.

Whatever your heart desires.

Okay then. He smiled. Here we go.

He finished his drink then smashed the glass into her face.

By the time she touched her shredded flesh and saw red running down onto the carpet he was standing above her. He grabbed her by the hair and punched her over and over until she heard something snap. The room whipped around with every impact. Gasp. She flailed desperately trying to block the blows. He let her go, then walked over to the suitcase on his bed, unzipped it, and took out a silenced handgun. It looked like something out of Call of Duty, big and sleek and futuristic.

She wanted to run or do anything but her legs wouldn't work. She opened her mouth but nothing came out. Just dead air. He walked back to her and pressed the barrel to her forehead.

I know what you're thinking, he said, is it loaded? He took aim at the pillow near where he had just been sitting. It exploded with a crack in a puff of feathers.

Here, he motioned at her. Get down. She obeyed. Fragments of glass embedded themselves in her knees. Open wide. He unzipped his pants and stuck the barrel of the gun in her mouth. It was warm and tasted acrid.

Suck it.

She did. It was still quite warm.

C'mon, bitch. You really gotta throat it.

She forced it down, even though it hurt her jaw.

Good girl. Good, good girl.

His cock smelled filthy. With the barrel down her throat he rubbed it up against her broken face. She watched the finger floating above the trigger and stuck her tongue out further until she puked. Don't stop sucking, he said. Do you wanna die? Her knees were wet and warm from all the fluids pooling on the carpet. Look at me, he said. His finger set itself on the trigger. Her eyes wandered to the door. Look! At! Me! Back to him. Her teeth scraped along the silencer. He was laughing at her.

The man was panting, jerking harder now. The head of his cock was swollen and red. Sweat like rain from his brow fell onto hers. Fuck! he came. All over her face and in her hair. He pulled the gun from her mouth and let it fall onto the carpet. She spat blood and vomit out and wiped on the back of her arm and gagged. The man pulled up his pants up and threw the rest of his money at her feet into her fluids. He picked up his drink from the table and downed it as she wept. Wow, he grinned, chuckling prematurely at the awful joke he was about to make about what he knew probably wasn't her actual name.

IV.

TSA STARED AT HIS ID FOR A MINUTE BEFORE NODDING HIM on. He couldn't blame them for their confusion. So much had changed in the last year. The girl in the picture's hair was so long. Just got it cut, he said. The man handed his license back.

It felt good to take a piss in a urinal. Months ago he would've felt too self-conscious but nothing seemed to phase him now. Resurgent testosterone had fixed all of that. Now he didn't have to think about nothing. He wore a filthy baggy faded Pantera shirt with cargo shorts. Pissing with his cock in one hand he texted dad with the other to let him know he was on his way. He washed his hands and paid too much for a beer at a very small Applebee's. The bartender asked if he was military. Just a dependent, he said. He didn't leave a tip.

On the flight home he closed his eyes and listened to OK Computer and Kid A. When he was a girl he had fallen out of love with Radiohead, but ever since detransitioning he had learned to appreciate them again. There was comfort in being sad. This was what he knew best. Long rides in the backseats of cars from state to state. Most of the time his eyes were closed, or else on his GameBoy or one of his dad's Stephen King paperbacks.

But never out the window. The world held no interest for him. What once was outside now only existed within. Two hours flew by in a moment, and he was finally back in Florida. He could feel the heat in his lungs the moment he stepped off the plane. Humid, heavy.

His dad was waiting for him in a big black truck. So the prodigal son has returned, he said. He wore a red Old Navy American flag shirt tucked in cutoff jeans and socks with sandals. Poison was playing on the radio. Every rose has its thorn. Just like every night has its dawn. Dad hit a button and changed the station. Can't stand those faggots, he said. A southern drawl told them they were listening to the home of classic rock and they started playing Lynyrd Skynyrd. They were miles down the road already. Dad turned the music up. Boy don't you worry, you'll find yourself. Follow your heart and nothing else.

You hungry?

Nah, I'm good. Though his stomach said otherwise.

Dad made some racist joke then said I ain't seen you seven god damn years and now you look like one of them Hollywood hookers. You been eating right?

I went vegetarian for a while. Lost some weight. Trying to get it back. God I would kill for some Waffle House or barbeque.

Figures. Liberal place like that. Easy to succumb to temptation. I warned you about that, you know. City living changed you, boy. I'm just glad you're home now.

The sun burned his eyes. He turned his attention to his lap, the roar of the engine, anywhere but here. Molly Hatchet on the radio now. Flirting with disaster. He let himself get lost between the notes. All that mattered was the songs, the order in their progression from one into the next. Nothing else was important.

Dad cracked open a couple Yuenglings. He just picked up the latest Terminator box set. You've got to hear this, the new nine point one surround, it's like you're at the movies. Dad turned the volume up.

Judgment Day always used to fuck him up as a kid. All the nuclear holocaust and that liquid metal killing machine was just way too fucking freaky. But he kept coming back for whatever reason. Maybe because him and the boy shared a name?

He hadn't realized until now how much his dad looked just like Arnold in that movie. Or at least whatever father figure he had made of his dad in his memory. He was always so much bigger in his head, a bit more muscular, softer skin. There was some feeling he couldn't place. He knew it was wrong. Or at least, as his son, something he shouldn't want.

He always imagined he'd feel safe and secure around Arnold. He didn't feel the same about his own dad. Why not? It wasn't like he didn't love him. He used to come into his bedroom late at night and stand at the foot of his bed for hours at a time, just watching, like a mourner holding vigil, or a gargoyle. Sometimes he would open his eyes up from a bad dream, see him there, sigh in relief and close his eyes again, drifting back to sleep in peace and comfort. Nothing bad could happen now. Daddy was always there.

His son hadn't noticed whatever he'd put in his soda. Cherry vanilla Coke masked the taste perfectly. It didn't take much to work. By the time it kicked in he didn't know what hit him.

He needed his son at least half awake for this. That much was important. Did you know a decapitated head can still see for about twenty seven seconds?

Dad pulled the shears apart with some effort until they clicked into place. He tested these on some dogs just a few nights before and they gave him no trouble.

His neck slipped forward as it was severed, but dad's fist caught it by the hair. He held it above the scene watched the blood gushing out the twitching cavity where his head used to be. There was a hole here, beside his hardness and the brutal light.

FRANCES WOKE IN FRIGHT AND SIGHED A BREATH OF RELIEF. Just another nightmare. Thank fucking god. She pinched herself again to make sure she was here now and nowhere else. Petra's breath was on her back and her hand along her side. It was still dark out but faint yellow light leaked through the blinds through drifts of snow. She had to pee really bad. Getting to the bathroom took some effort. Her legs were still weak from all the OxyContin.

It took a while to relax enough to piss. The hum of the fan made her head ache. She checked her phone. Three thirty three in the morning. When did she go to bed again? She had fallen asleep watching *Spirited Away*. Petra had tucked her in. What a movie. As a kid it felt so magical but now it made her feel so sad and empty. No one should have to work so hard or grow up that fast because their parents don't have proper restaurant etiquette. It hit very different after all those years in food service. Now that she thought about it Kiki's Delivery Service was kind of the same deal. Frances watched it earlier this year on mushrooms. There's that scene where she helps the old lady clean her oven and bake a pie for her snotty daughter who says it's stupid and rejects it. That's when Kiki loses her magic, and coincidentally

from there Frances could pinpoint the exact moment in her own life where she had lost hers. Watching that movie wound up completely ruining the rest of her trip. She spent the next few hours stuck in bed listening to early Autechre and Selected Ambient Works Volume II. What the fuck happened to her? Where was the passion? It wasn't like she couldn't still do witchcraft. Nothing was stopping her except herself. Fuck. That really was a good movie. She opened Letterboxd and tried to write a review but couldn't think of anything meaningful to say.

In the morning Petra made her breakfast. Frances dreaded such a kindness, knowing what she was about to do. But now was obviously not the time. She still had a wad of gauze stuffed between her ass cheeks. The doctors told her it could take a couple days to have a bowel movement because of the sedative. It was uncomfortable but at least it didn't hurt like it used to. In time she wouldn't feel anything there. Just a little scar, maybe.

Eggs, toast and coffee. She wasted no time opening her laptop. Frances wanted to make the most of her afternoon and these edibles. Petra seemed to understand.

Seven months ago the doctors diagnosed her with a fistula, and it had been just as many months since they last fucked. It wasn't like they couldn't have sex. but it's hard to get turned on with an abscess in your anus.

Frances compared her revisions with the original piece. Neither resembled the other, aside from structure and some plot beats. She couldn't change those.

Petra had some work to do. Frances said Drive safe and I love you. Which was true, but these words felt arbitrary. She knew she was going to break up with her.

Ironically this was the best their relationship had ever been. Maybe because she was sober now. The doctor told her she had to quit drinking. Otherwise it might fuck with the sedative. Frances was scared it wouldn't make a difference. They wouldn't know how deep the ulcer lied until they put her under anesthesia. If it was too big they would have to loop a seton through the infection to let it drain, which would've sucked shit.

As bad as it would get Frances vowed to never killed herself. She wouldn't allow it. Natalie's suicide had broken something inside of her. All those years they spent isolating themselves together shattered any illusion of actually being alone. There's no way out that doesn't hurt someone else. Either someone finds the body, or they don't. She couldn't put anyone else through that.

Frances was still so very angry at her. She was in the hospital when it happened. They had taken her phone, so no one could tell her what had happened until she was out. By then she had already missed the funeral.

The night before Natalie died Frances locked herself in the bathroom of a friend's apartment and threatened to slit her wrists. Her friend called a suicide hotline, who in turn sent the cops to break down the door.

The worst was no one seemed to believe her. What do you mean she's gone? Petra laughed like it was some kind of joke. That really hurt. When Frances tried to explain Petra looked at her like she was stupid. Do you not remember? Frances said. You two used to date.

Of course I remember. But now we're back together.

She was flipping through a copy of *Fight Club*. Maybe they actually were the same person? She used to dream from her point of view, or else was able to read her mind from long distance. Sometimes it felt like they shared a perspective. But that all seemed like wishful thinking. Reddit hadn't given her any answers, and she still felt uncomfortable about self diagnosis.

In the hours after she heard the news Frances drank so much she couldn't remember throwing up all over the apartment. When she came to there was blood from a big nasty gash that must've been from falling into something. Her mouth was cracked and bleeding and her legs wouldn't work. She had to drag herself to the kitchen across the floor to call someone. Don't let them take me back, she said. Please. I can't do another stay.

When they were young Frances and Natalie went to stay at their uncle's or their dad. The details were fuzzy. Whoever it was gave her beer and it made her feel funny. Then someone did something to either her or her sister. Frances couldn't remember what had actually happened, and she didn't want to know. It was scary and awful.

Every day she found herself increasingly lost. There were so many paths to choose from and no one left to guide her along them. Maybe breaking up wasn't such a good idea after all. She should probably talk to Petra about this later. At the very least she felt like she owed her some sort of explanation. Girlfriends aren't supposed to think or act that way about each other.

It felt heretical to try and pass these stories off as her own, but Frances had no other options. She needed the money. It was totally fucked up but it seemed even more fucked to let these words go forgotten, lost to the ravages of time. The very least she could do for her now was give them a new lease on life. Even if the name was wrong.

Frances would live through this. Terrified and stark. She couldn't give up hope. Time might not heal all, but it would get better. She could only imagine. It would be rough going at first. Other girls left strong impressions, like bite marks. Souvenirs, if only for tomorrow. Fading, but beautiful. Not quite unlike love. Reason enough.

Writing herself into fiction was perhaps Natalie's greatest mistake. Who could say? Frances was obviously biased against it. There were two sides to this equation. Most of her work came off as preposterous and was obviously false. Yet whatever rang true hit a little bit too close to home. Natalie was cruel, not the least unlike her writing. Frances could source the worst from experience. It fucking sucked. Why would anyone want to tell a story like that? At best it was navel gazing, at worst nothing more than a trauma dump. Natalie had made herself a mirror image of the art, or its opposite. Living or dead she had become irreversibly enmeshed. Frances couldn't hope to extract her. She thought maybe drugs would help rationalize these masochistic ends but getting high only obfuscated any actual insight. It wasn't until she got sober she came to the brutal realization there was no epiphany waiting for her at the end, no wisdom to be garnered from her sister's death. Seven months slipped through her fingers like water and she still didn't know what any of this shit meant. Oh well, she thought. Whatever. Never mind that now. There would always be tomorrow. Power options. Shut down. Yes.

(F.A.G. 2023)

THANK YOU

*Agatha, Alexandrine, Alice, Audrey, B.R., Briar,
Carrie, Casey, Christie, Claire, Claude, Courtney, Dani,
Emily, Erica, Erika, Ernie, Eva, Faye, Frankie, Frog,
George, Hannah, Ivy, Jackie, Jaffa, Jeremiah, June, Kurt,
Laura, Linette, Lucca, Marina, Modesty, Natalie,
Never, Paige, Penelope, Petra, Primrose, Princess
Mittens, Ramona, Roz, Sybil, Venus, Viktor, Vince,
& everyone I've ever slept with.*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NATALIE TAUTOU was born in 1991.

This is her last book.

EXTRANEOUS

*fonts used include EB Garamond Medium
& IM Fell English SC.
gut text formatted in LibreOffice Writer.*

*words by Natalie Celeste Tautou.
editing, art & photography by Frances Avalyn Green.*

*cover inspired by The HIRS Collective & Thou's
split release "I Have Become Your Pupil".
typography inspired by death metal band logos & Castlevania,
drawn freehand using the author's bodily fluids & edited in GIMP.*

I take no credit for my influences. all apologies.



@mommywiseau
mommyswomb.itch.io
natalie.c.tautou@gmail.com